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CONTENTS

VOLUME 23, 2008

COVER PHOTO:
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FEATURES

30 Q & A: JESSE VENTURA
From AWA tag team title to small-town mayor to Minnesota governor, the life of Jesse Ventura has taken some wild turns. One thing that hasn't changed for "The Body" is his mouth. He's as opinionated as ever, and he spent an hour with our own Dan Murphy for this exclusive interview

46 STAR FOR THE STARMAKER! VINCE MCMAHON GETS IMMORTALIZED IN HOLLYWOOD
He's not a movie star. He's not a sellout or a top-10 singer. He doesn't even live in California. But Vince McMahon became part of Hollywood history when the Walk of Fame gave him his very own star

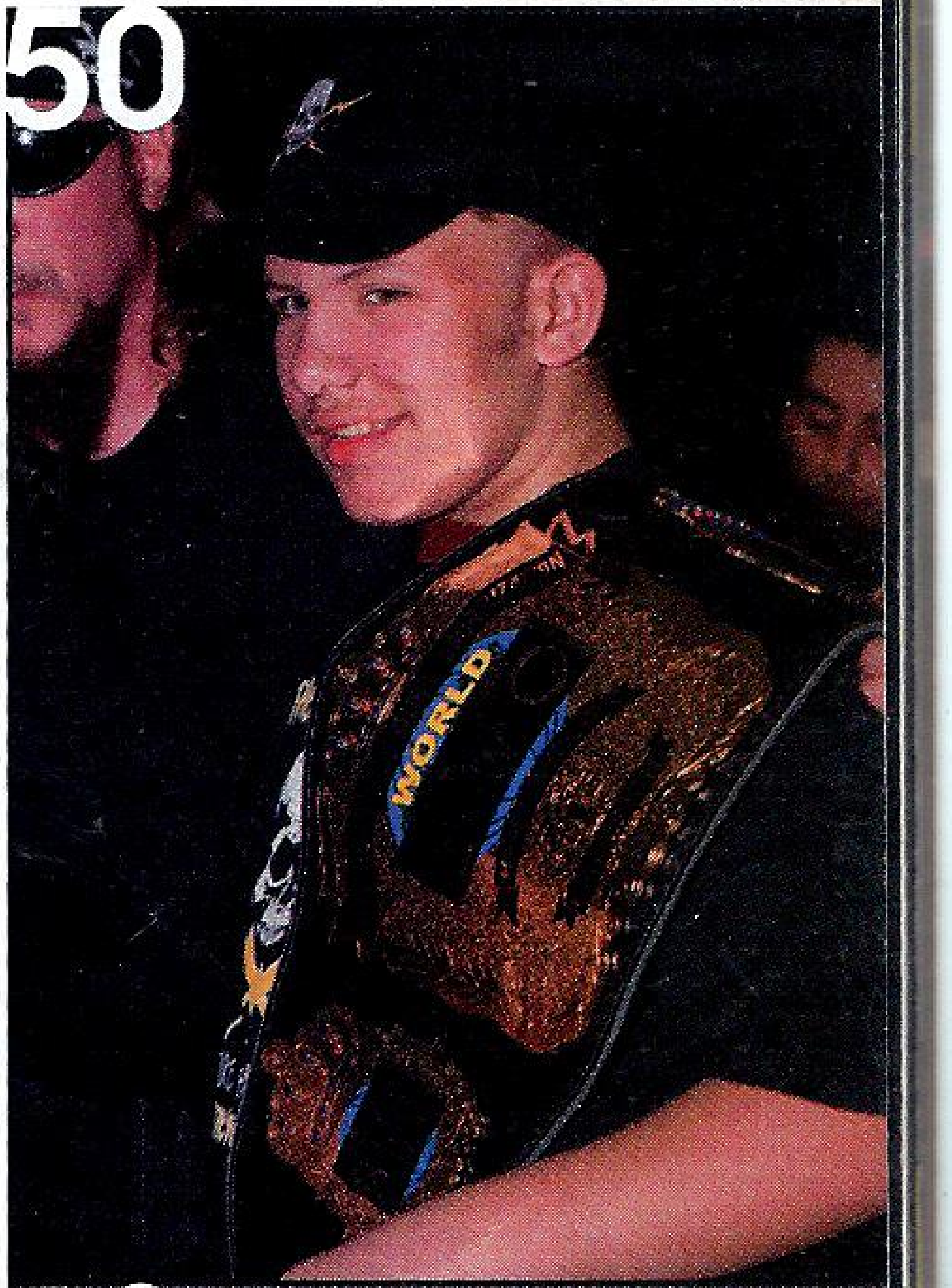
50 A TRUE CHAMPION: BWO STEPS UP TO HONOR A BRAVE FAN BATTLING CANCER
Bodyslam Wrestling Organization answered the call to help when they heard one of its fans was battling cancer. Harold Wrightington had an experience he won't soon forget

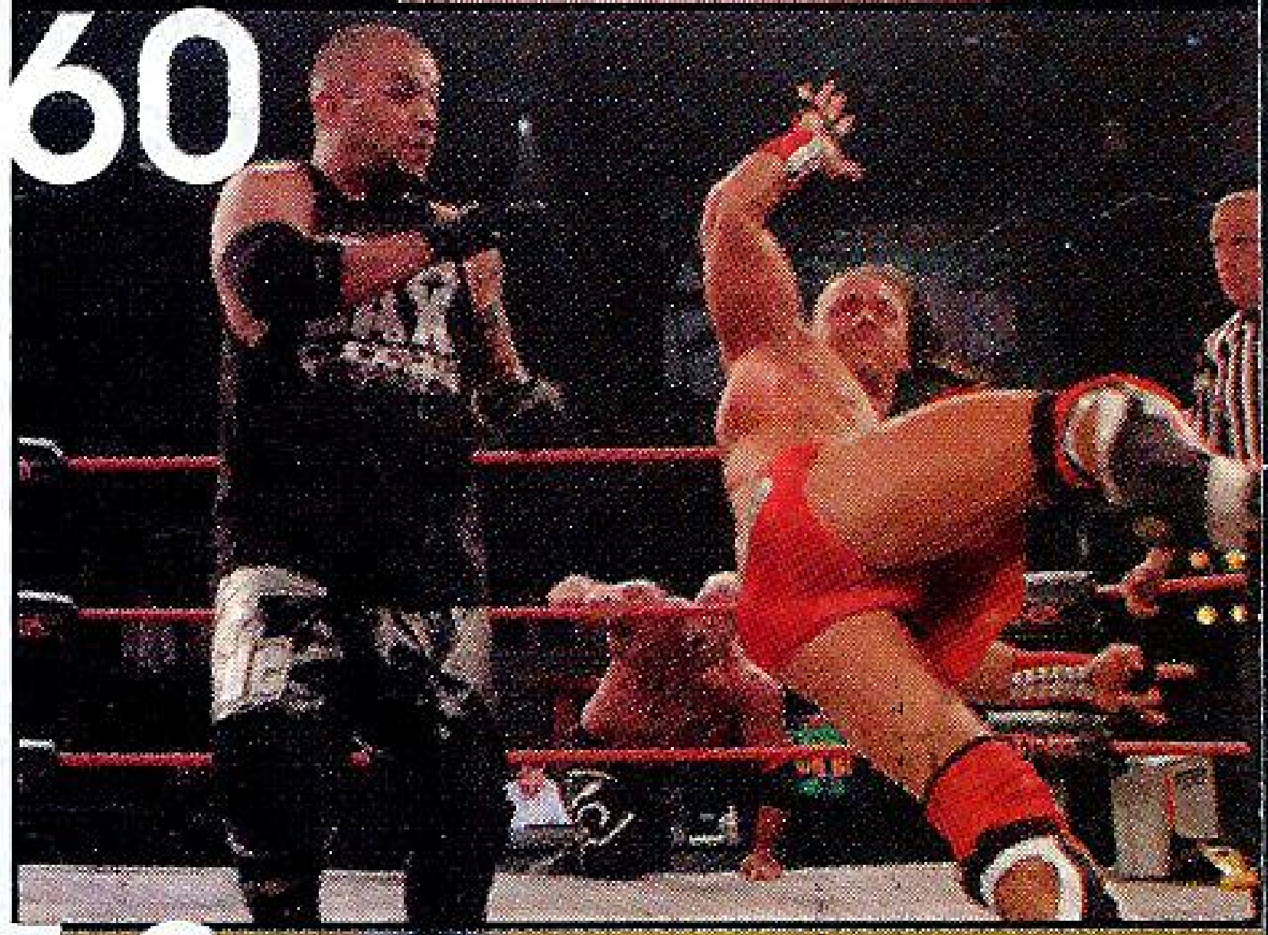
54 TRIPLE-H'S 12TH REIGN: HOW HE CAN MAKE THIS ONE THE BEST
He may have carried a lot of gold in his career, but he has never held it long enough to compete with legends like Flair, Race, or Sammartino. To make his mark in the business, Trips needs to make this reign matter

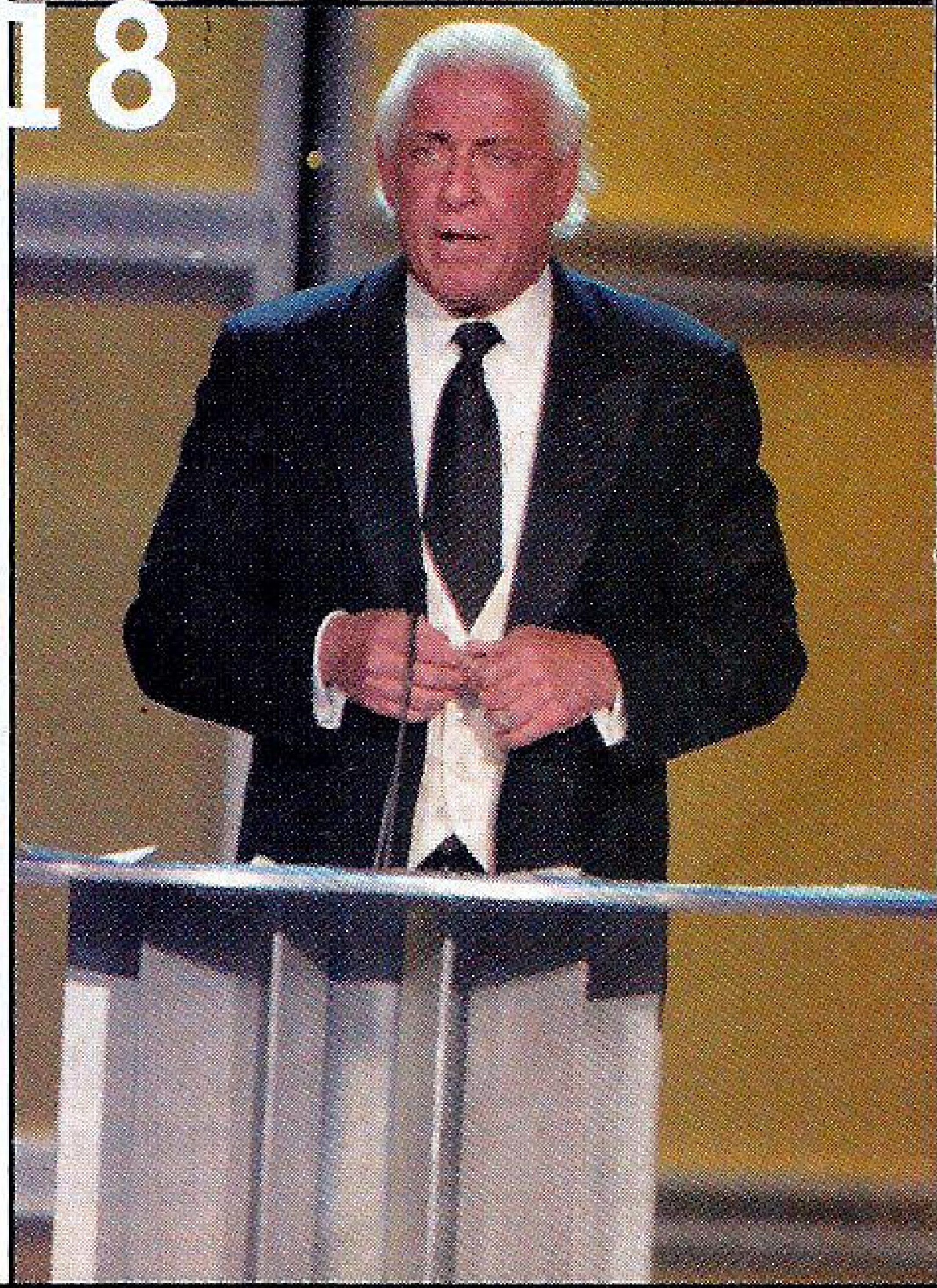
60 OUR MESSAGE TO PETEY WILLIAMS: YOU DON'T HAVE TO PUT UP WITH STEINER ANYMORE
Competing against such compelling characters as Jay Lethal and Sonjay Dutt, Petey Williams came to realize that talent alone was no longer enough to make it big in TNA. Scott Steiner may have supplied the short term answer, but now it's time for "Maple Leaf Muscle" to show "Big Poppa Pump" the door

DEPARTMENTS

4 **YOUR LETTERS**
6 **WHAT'S HAPPENING** BY BRADY HICKS
12 **KREW-CUTS** WITH FRANK KREWDA
14 **ON ASSIGNMENT** BY LIZ HUNTER
16 **THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN**
18 **POINT/COUNTERPOINT**
20 **INTRODUCING ... ARYA DAIVARI**
22 **WORKIN' STIFF** BY AL CASTLE
24 **SPOTLIGHT ON ... SCOTT STEINER**
40 **WRESTLING'S GREATEST PHOTOS**
66 **THE WRESTLING ANALYST: BOOKER T**
72 **OFFICIAL WRESTLING RATINGS**
74 **REMEMBER HIM?**







Look for the Volume 24, 2008, issue of *The Wrestler/Inside Wrestling* on sale September 9, 2008

YOUR LETTERS

BABBLERS' BATTLE ROYAL

I can't remember the last time non-wrestlers were talked about more than they have been over the past few months. I'm not talking about managers or GMs, but commentators.

A year ago, wrestling fans were lucky: Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler were great as always, JBL had really helped make Michael Cole a very entertaining play-by-play man, and Tazz and Joey Styles were easy to listen to.

But this all changed when JBL decided to lace up his boots again. Coach became a color commentator. Michael Cole, who had risen to a level of confidence that he had never been at before, was stuck beside Coachman.

You're only as good as your partner, and Coach is not good at calling wrestling matches. It sounded quite awkward to listen to two men who are suited to being blow-by-blow announcers. I thought that was the lowest WWE announcing could go, but boy was I wrong.

Mike Adamle is very unique at what he does. He states facts a toddler could figure out, and he is funny—but for all the wrong reasons.

Wrestling fans have created many effective ways of describing situations like "Cena heat" or "jobbing to someone," and now there should be a new saying to describe a commentator who has had a very, very bad night: the "Adamle." But despite his flaws, Adamle is still better than Coach.

Thankfully, Smackdown has been better since Backlash. That's because Coachman left. I can now turn up the volume again because Mick Foley provides a fresh sound to the blue brand. He is informed, humorous, and, most importantly, he makes Michael Cole sound good. Hopefully, we are out of the slump, but who knows, there's always Adamle. Have mercy!

MIKE ANDERSON
Auckland, New Zealand

A BEATDOWN EARNED

Lots of fans were booing and whining when Kurt Angle attacked A.J. Styles with a chair on *Impact,* but I sure wasn't one of them.

I believe Styles deserved every single kick and punch he got from Booker T, Tyson Tomko, Team 3D, and Angle that night.

I'm sorry, but you just don't mess around with another man's wife. Styles keeps saying he and Karen are just friends, but I know friendship when I see it, and it doesn't involve tongue kissing.

Besides, Karen all but admitted she was seeing Styles when Kurt confronted her on *Impact.* She said A.J. was there for her and that he understood her. Then she walked out on Kurt and left him on his knees in the middle of the ring, looking like a fool.

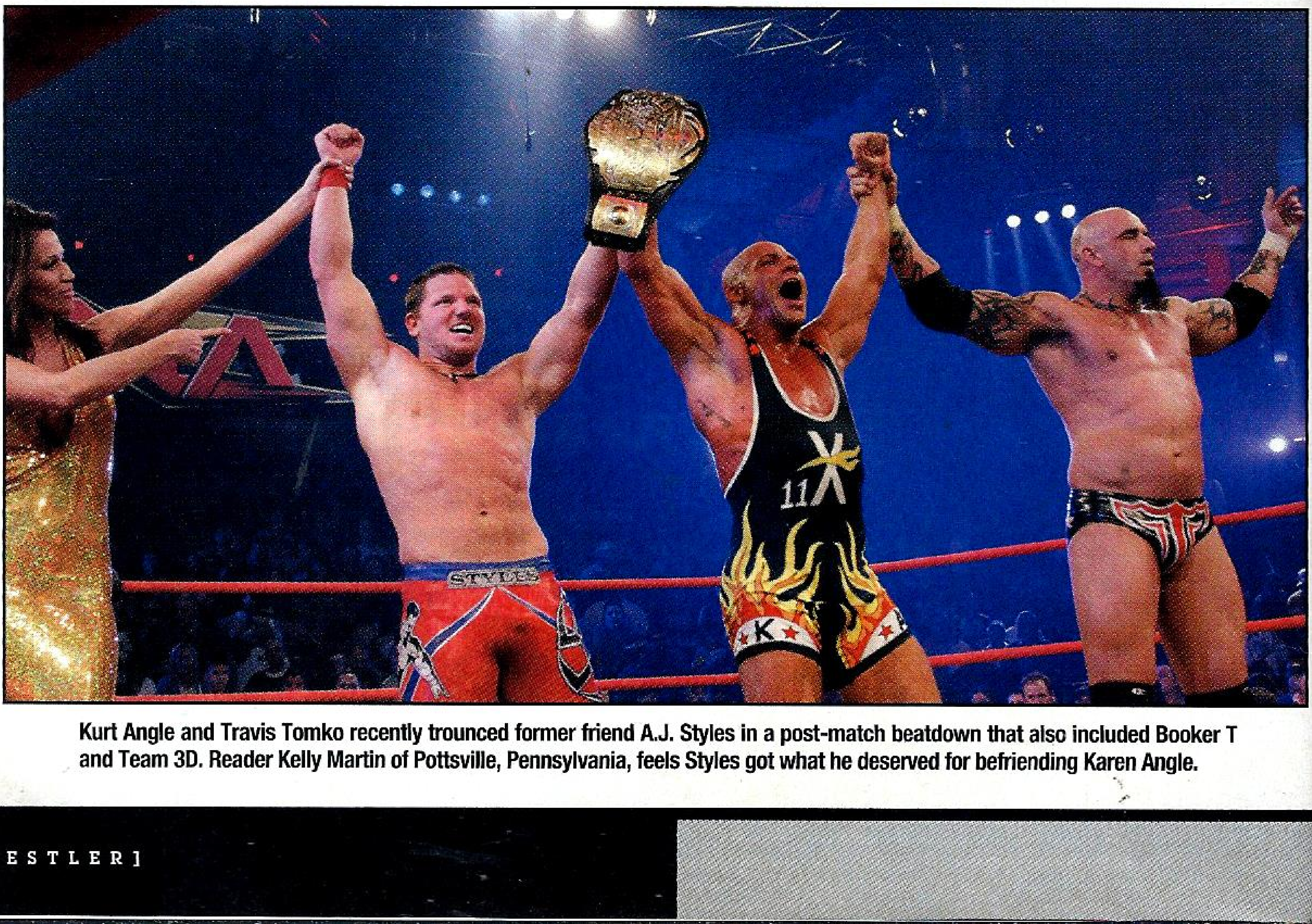


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Kurt Angle and Travis Tomko recently trounced former friend A.J. Styles in a post-match beatdown that also included Booker T and Team 3D. Reader Kelly Martin of Pottsville, Pennsylvania, feels Styles got what he deserved for befriending Karen Angle.

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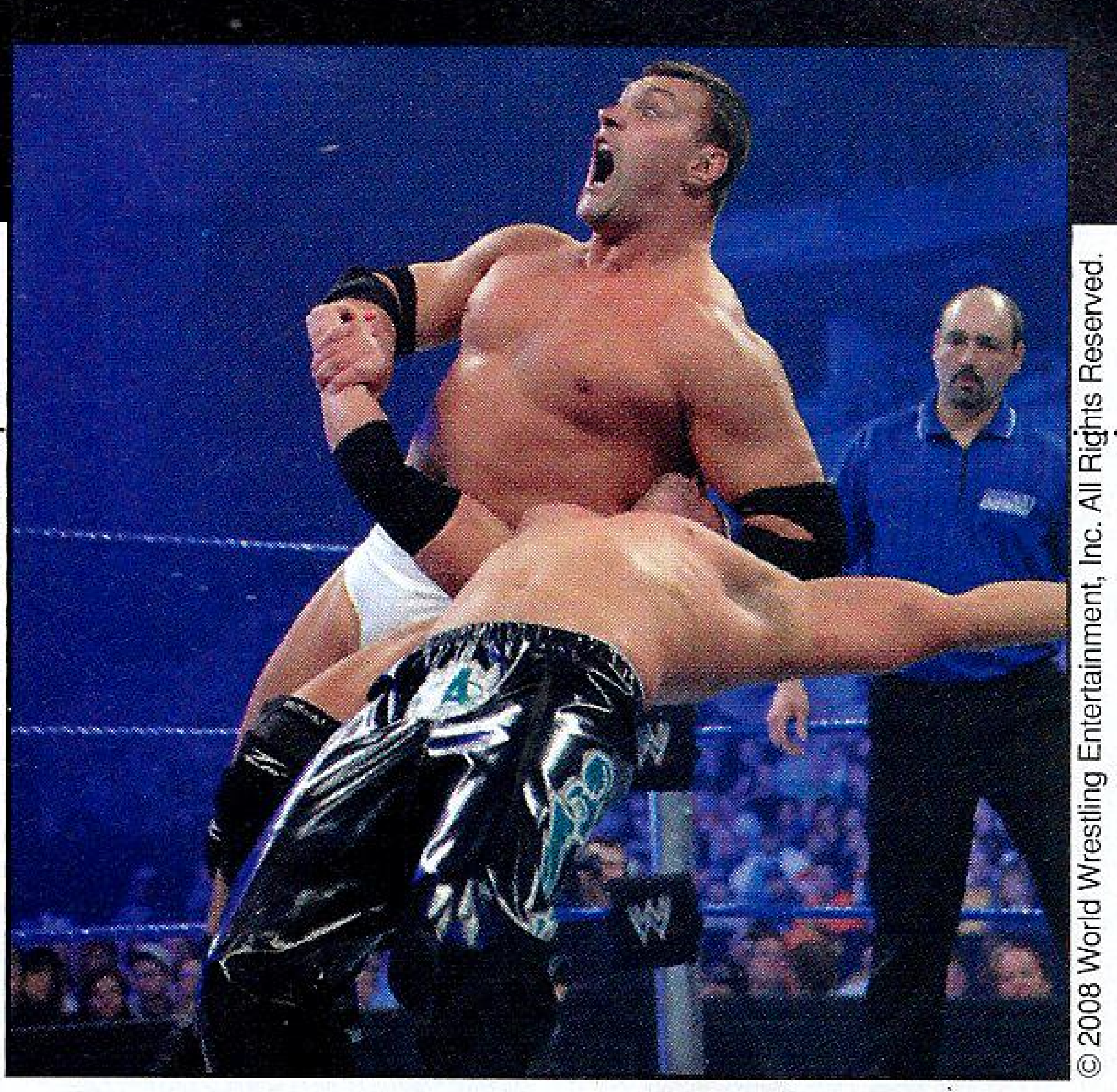
No doubt, A.J. is an excellent competitor, and maybe Angle should have fought him in the ring, one on one. But Styles should have realized that even giving the impression that you've got the hots for another man's wife is grounds for a major beatdown—and he sure got one on *Impact*.

KELLY MARTIN
Pottsville, PA



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It's a familiar sight—Vladimir Kozlov dominating a nameless, faceless opponent on Smackdown. According to reader Geoff Dole of Atlanta, Georgia, Kozlov and his fans would benefit from stiffer competition.

KOZLOV NEEDS TESTING

When are we going to see Vladimir Kozlov take on some stiffer competition in WWE? Sure, he's big and mean, but anybody would look phenomenal against the no-name jobbers he's been beating.

Not only is WWE doing the fans a disservice by having him mow through undersized and overmatched opponents, it is also harming Kozlov's career. Vladimir's fans—of which I am one—want to see him flourish in WWE. Watching him beat weak opposition every week does nothing to showcase his potential, and it gives his supporters very little to get behind.

This whole situation reminds me of how WCW handled Goldberg in his formative years. WCW wanted to build him up as an ass-kicking machine, but the short squashes and endless parade of bums created a backlash among some fans who just wouldn't give Goldberg the credit he deserved for adding a spark to WCW.

I think the big Russian can have a similar impact on Smackdown, but, for crying out loud, let's get on with it already.

GEOFF DOLE
Atlanta, GA

JUST DOING OUR JOB

I just received Volume 23, 2008 of *Inside Wrestling/The Wrestler*. Wow! What an issue. I thought the way you guys handled Ric Flair's retirement was very classy, and the "Q&A" with Jim Cornette was off the charts! I guess the Cornette we see on TV isn't all that different than the Cornette behind the scenes. Also, I couldn't have agreed more with Dave Lenker's opinion as expressed in the "Editor's Roundtable" article. TNA is ruining its product with way too many campy characters and storylines. Your magazine rocks! Keep up the good work.

BOB HILL
Kansas City, MO □

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

IT SEEMS AS if WWE has been in the mainstream news for some stories largely unrelated to its wrestling product. Recent WWE scandals include allegations of racism by a top-level staffer, suspicion that one Diva is a former Los Angeles call girl, and outside pressure to the change one of its substance abuse policies.

First, former **Freebird** and current creative writer **Michael Hayes** was suspended for 60 days without pay in late-April by WWE officials for an incident that occurred during WrestleMania weekend in Orlando, Florida. An intoxicated Hayes made racist remarks to Smackdown wrestler **Mark Henry** at a party and Henry subsequently filed a complaint with **Stephanie McMahon**, to whom Hayes reports as a writer for Smackdown.

Raw Diva **Ashley Massaro** is denying allegations made in a May 2008 *Rolling Stone* story that named her as one of several high-profile employees of Bella Models agency, a Los Angeles-based escort service. The FBI also confirmed it is investigating the agency for potential illegal activity. The probe uncovered the names of several models and porn stars identified on Bella Models' payroll. The high-end service is said to be run by **Michelle "Nici" Braun**, who would set up dates for the firm's clientele, many of who paid more than $25,000 for a night.

It is not yet known what effect these news stories will have on WWE's willingness to use either Hayes or Massaro in the future. Given that Hayes is expected to return to work and Massaro is still active, it appears neither will be fired.

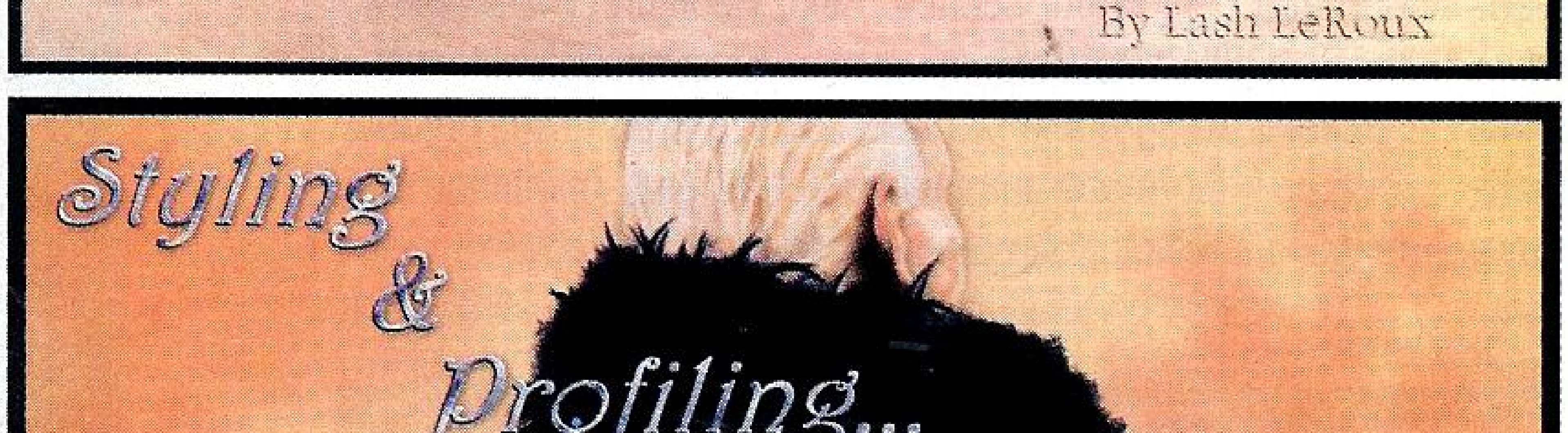
WWE wrestlers are reportedly uneasy with a recent change made to the company's drug testing policy. According to PWinsider.com, under the new rules each competitor is required to urinate into a cup with a witness looking on. While no official reason has been given for the change in policy, one has to assume the change came about because wrestlers were finding ways to cheat the very tests designed to preserve their own health. Some wrestlers claim the new procedure is degrading and humiliating.

On a more positive note, Raw will no longer be pre-empted by the U.S. Open on the USA Network beginning in 2009. That's because ESPN recently signed a six-year deal for the rights to the tennis tournament. The deal will go into effect in 2009, so USA will still have the Open in September.

In what could be viewed as an almost sad conclusion to *Hogan Knows Best*, **Nick Bollea**, the 17-year-old son of **Hulk Hogan**—with divorcing parents and sister **Brooke Hogan** looking on—was sentenced to eight months in a Pinellas County, Florida, prison for his role in the auto crash that seriously injured his friend **John Graziano**. Bollea pleaded no contest to the felony charges filed against him and was thus at the mercy of the courts. He was also ordered to serve five years probation, three years of suspended driving, five years of alcohol-related probation, 500 hours of community service, and DUI school. He will also pay nearly $7,000 in fines.

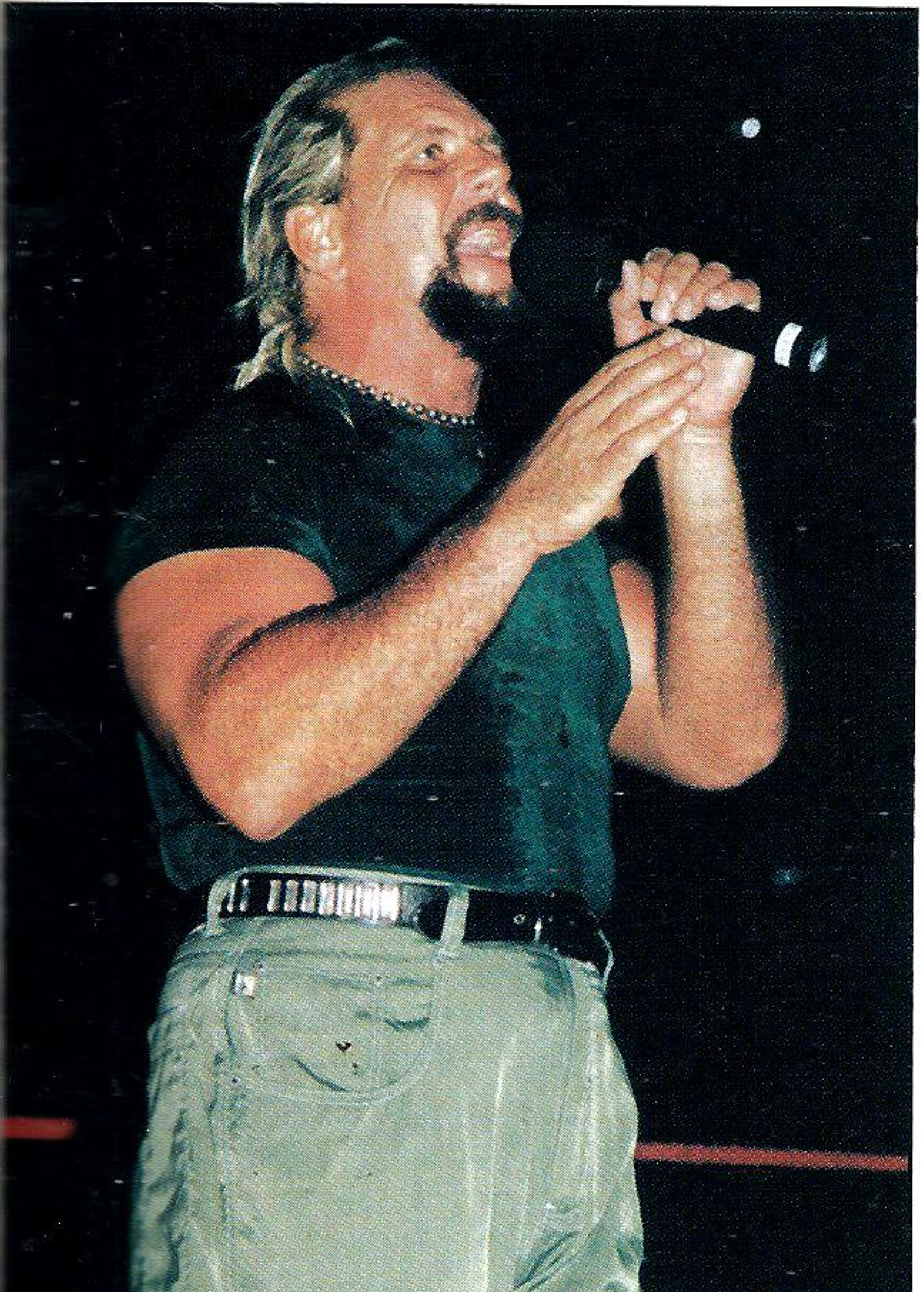
"LASHING OUT!"

By Lash LeRoux



BY BRADY HICKS

One of "The Hulkster's" biggest rivals is on the cusp of an in-ring return. **The Ultimate Warrior**'s impending Nu Wrestling Evolution match in Spain against NWE champion **Orlando Jordan** comes nearly 10 years after his last appearance in WCW. Warrior, who received an award in celebration of his career during an April NWE show, was interrupted by an irritated Jordan, who mocked one of Warrior's young fans at ringside. The former WWF World champion was to have had wrestled Jordan in Barcelona after press time for this issue.



No stranger to making controversial statements, Smackdown writer Michael Hayes was recently suspended by WWE for making racially insensitive remarks to Mark Henry.

Everybody knows WWE Diva Ashley was once a *Playboy* pinup girl, but a recent *Rolling Stone* article says she may have also been a Los Angeles-based call girl.

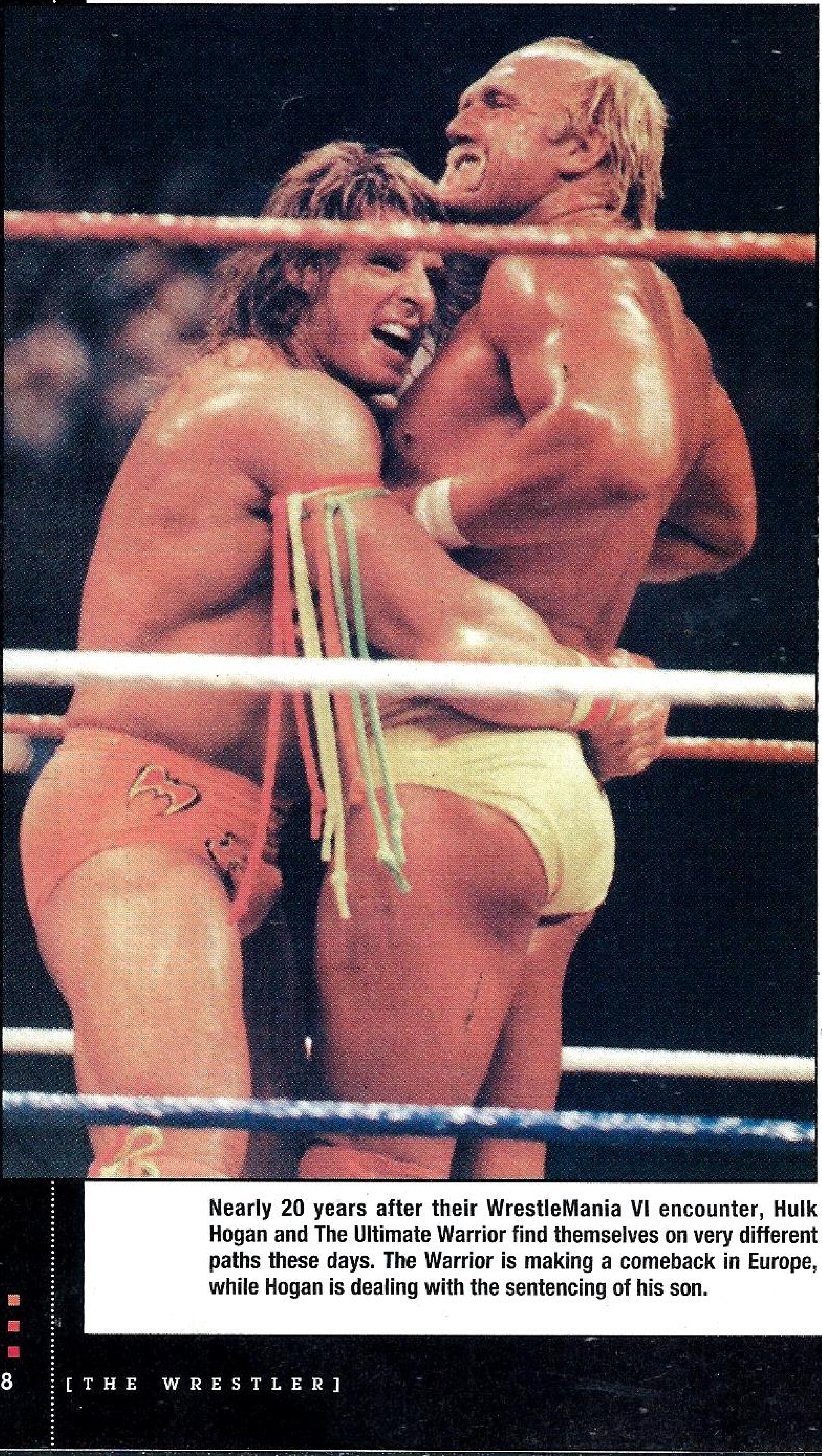
While The Ultimate Warrior's return has a lot of people intrigued, you have to wonder if forging a relationship with Warrior—who has burned many bridges in his lifetime—is a wise move.

As if **Rey Mysterio Jr.** didn't have enough going wrong for him with his biceps injury, he and his wife were in China during the earthquake that killed thousands of people. Mysterio was making a media appearance at Xian TV station when the 7.9 quake started. Fortunately, Mysterio made it safely back to his hotel room.

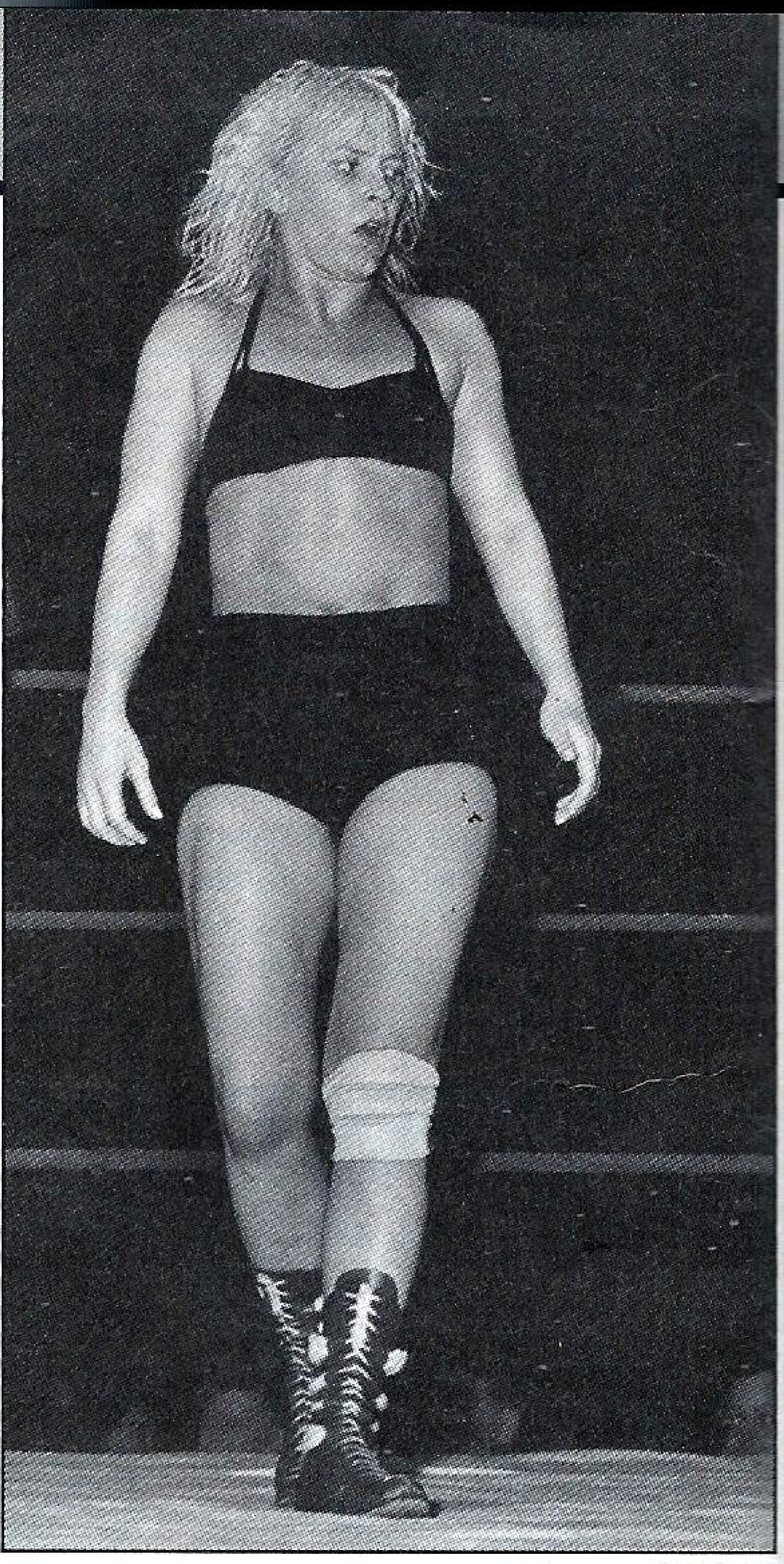
Bret Hart recently made a surprise visit to Florida Championship Wrestling's training center, reportedly at his niece **Natalya**'s request. "The Hitman" spoke to the WWE hopefuls about following their dreams, and critiqued several matches. **Ted DiBiase Jr.** was certainly moved by Hart's presence and feedback, reporting on his blog, "It was an inspirational night for me and the entire FCW staff."

Legendary female competitor and wrestling ambassador **Penny Banner** died on May 12 in Charlotte, North Carolina, after a long bout with cancer. Banner, who was elected to the Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame in 2007, was known for her wrestling ability, her friendly demeanor … and for having once dated Elvis Presley. Banner was 73.

Recently, we at The Wrestler were also saddened to learn of the death of **Nellya Burres-Baughman**, who is better known to wrestling historians as **Judy Grable**. Despite being a top figure in women's wrestling for a number of years, Grable is not widely known by many wrestling fans of today. Her name will be permanently etched in history, however, for a 1956 tournament final loss to the late **Fabulous Moolah**, which allowed Moolah to win the Women's title and hold on to it for nearly 30 years. No cause of death has been determined. Grable was 82 years old.



Nearly 20 years after their WrestleMania VI encounter, Hulk Hogan and The Ultimate Warrior find themselves on very different paths these days. The Warrior is making a comeback in Europe, while Hogan is dealing with the sentencing of his son.



Former female superstar Penny Banner recently passed away in Charlotte, North Carolina, after a lengthy battle with cancer. Banner was 73.

Also lost was 86-year-old **Shuji Joe Nozawa** (**Fuji Nazawa**), a California-born wrestler better known for his roles in movies and TV programs such as *The King And I, Wackiest Ship In The Army, The Beverly Hillbillies, Mission Impossible, The Wrecking Crew*, and *Time Tunnel.*

Finally, wrestling fans mourn the loss of **"Wild" Bill Savage**, who competed throughout Texas, the West Coast, and the Pacific Northwest during a 16-year career in the 1950s and 1960s. Savage, who also wrestled under a mask as **The Cyclops**, had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease for about a year. Those close to him claim Savage was able to recognize the wrestlers who came to visit him, but very few others.

TNA star **Petey Williams** suffered a broken orbital bone during a recent *Impact* tag team match with **Scott Steiner** against TNA champion **Samoa Joe** and **Kurt Angle**. Williams, who has been gradually adopting more of an arrogant persona that reflects his allegiance with "Big Poppa Pump," suffered the injury only a week after his X title win over **"Black Machismo" Jay Lethal**. As of presstime, it had been reported that Williams would continue to work despite the injury. ☐

KREW-CUTS

BY FRANK KREWDA

WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES, ANOTHER ONE OPENS. Readers of this column could probably visualize my horror and dismay upon learning Torrie Wilson had been given her WWE release back in May.

Simply stated, I've always considered Torrie to be the hottest woman to *ever* appear on wrestling TV for *any* reason ... and now she's gone.

It was while searching for a good reason to continue my career in wrestling journalism that I realized there might be a silver lining to Torrie's departure.

After all, with Torrie gone, my annual ranking of the women of wrestling might actually become a fair assessment of what the females—between the ropes—have to offer the industry.

Then after some more thought, I decided judging female wrestlers 100 percent on their looks—without any regard for their wrestling skills or talents on a microphone—would still be much more fun.

Torrie's departure has given me cause to create the "Torrie" award. The Torrie is to be awarded to the hottest female wrestling personality in the business as judged by our Board (me).

In the category of Prettiest Face, the nominees are:

Daffney, SHIMMER: Having seen photos of Daffney without the pancake make-up and heavy-duty eyeliner, I can assure you she doesn't need it.

Maria Kanellis, WWE: The beauty in Maria's face (big round eyes, pouting lips, etc.) is often obscured by her other physical traits and her appearance in *Playboy.*

Mickie James, WWE: The beauty in Mickie's face (bright smile, turned up nose, etc.) is often eclipsed by her psychotic character.

Velvet Sky, TNA: If it's possible to take the eyes off Sky's rear view, folks might realize her front side is just as impressive.

Maryse Ouellete, WWE: When one considers how impressive the whole package is, it's hard to believe anybody even notices Maryse's smile. But it lights up her whole face.

Lena Yada, WWE. Just when it seemed as if Gail Kim had the market on Asian beauty cornered, along came Lena. She doesn't have Kim's physique, but then Kim doesn't have Yada's face.

Winner: Maryse Oullete, WWE.

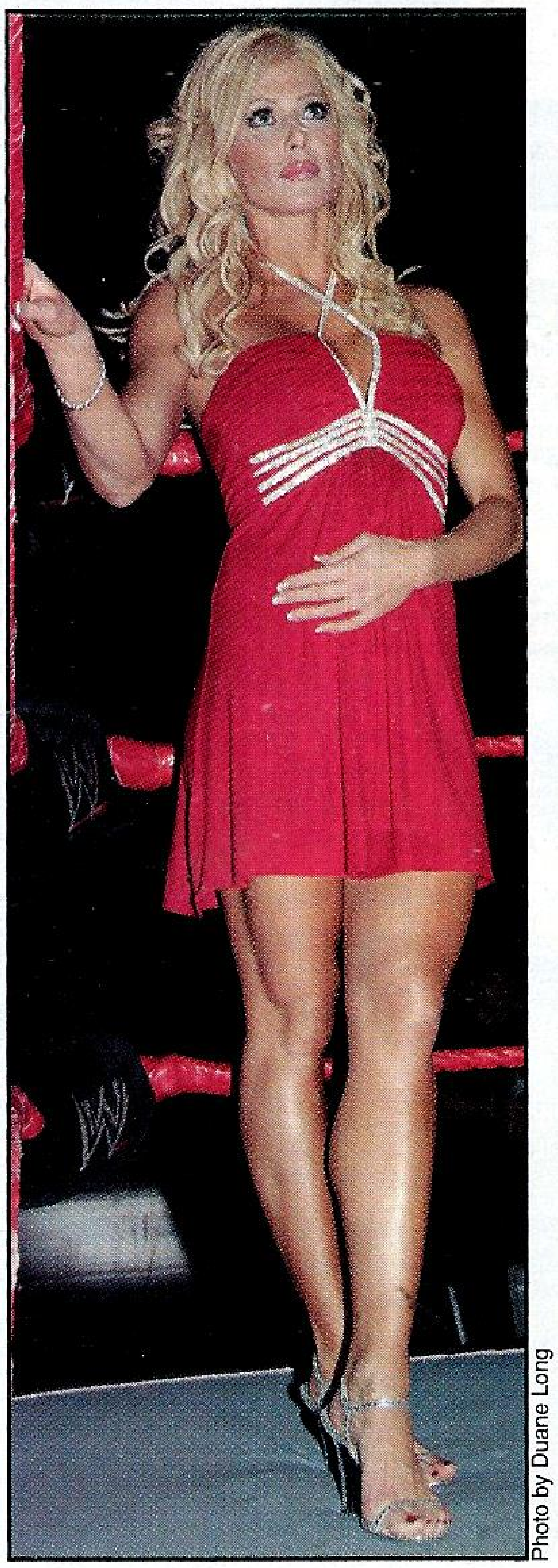


Photo by Duane Long

The Torrie Wilson Era of WWE came to an end in May when Wilson was given her release. Managing Editor Frank Krewda has found a unique way to honor Torrie's contributions to professional wrestling.

In the category of Best Upper Body, the nominees are:

Traci Brooks, TNA: Can anyone who's seen the photo shoot of Traci wearing nothing but a necktie please explain how such a little piece of cloth can cover so much flesh? She really does put the "T" in TNA.

Jillian Hall, WWE: As impressive as Jillian's upper body is, it fails to overshadow her terrible voice and annoying gimmick, but that's okay.

ODB, TNA: ODB claims her chest is all natural—filled with vodka. Does anyone else consider vodka as unnatural as saline?

Ashley Massaro, WWE: There are two big reasons Ashley went from Diva hopeful to *Playboy* centerfold seemingly overnight.

Cherry, WWE: Cherry seems more comfortable covering her assets than sharing the goodness. Too bad.

Winner: Traci Brooks, TNA.

In the category of Best Lower Body, the nominees are:

Velvet Sky, TNA: Sorry, Traci, Velvet puts the "A" in TNA. And if anybody wants to know why, all they have to do is tune in to *Impact.*

Mickie James, WWE: One of these days, Mickie will find a ring outfit that keeps her lower body covered. And that's when I'll change the channel.

Angelina Love, TNA: Love's stock in this category would rise considerably if she spent less time competing in long pants.

Maria Kanellis, WWE: Living proof nice things sometimes come in small packages—no pun intended.

Sara Del Rey, SHIMMER: Whoever said women need to be glamour queens or plastic-surgery addicts in order to turn heads never saw Del Rey.

Winner: Velvet Sky, TNA

In the category of Female Wrestler With the Most Sex Appeal, the nominees are:

Christy Hemme, TNA: I can't put my finger on exactly what it is that makes Hemme stand out from just about all the other Knockouts. It could be her red hair. It could be the vulgar gesture she often makes with her fingers and tongue. Probably the latter.

Melina, WWE: Other than deliberately trying to make the entire male 14 to 35 demographic salivate every Monday night, there's no reason for Melina to feature that racy leg-split.

Beth Phoenix, WWE: Perhaps since she's no longer women's champ, WWE can spend less time pushing her athletic prowess and more time pushing her hotness, for which she doesn't get enough credit.

Velvet Sky, TNA: Velvet Sky commands attention just by showing up at a TNA event.

Traci Brooks, TNA: Oh, okay ... Traci puts the "T" *and* "A" in TNA.

Winner: Velvet Sky, TNA

In the category of Best Looking Female Wrestler Most of You Probably Haven't Seen, the nominees are:

Becky Bayless, Various Independents: Bayless puts me in mind of a smaller, slightly less-shapely Brooks, but with a more pleasing face. Good company.

Rebecca Knox, Various Independents: This spunky Irish lass has all the physical prerequisites to capture the hearts of the male fan base. But recent SHIMMER and ChickFights no-shows have limited her profile.

Dark Angel/Sarah Stock, Mexico, Various Independents: TNA had an opportunity to sign this stunning luchadora and, inexplicably, passed. Hopefully, they won't make the mistake a second time.

Allison Danger, SHIMMER: Steve Corino's prettier sibling has been a fixture on the U.S. indy scene and has recently exported her understated beauty to Japanese fans.

Winner: Becky Bayless.

And ... the winner of the 2008 Torrie Award is ... Velvet Sky, TNA.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Few ladies can fill out this outfit like TNA's Velvet Sky can. With Torrie retired from wrestling, Krewda says Sky is the new standard-bearer for wrestling hotness.

THE TRUTH ABOUT LADIES WRESTLING. There seems to be a growing perception among fans that TNA is home to more "legitimate" women's wrestling.

Where the WWE Divas are merely a T&A troupe, TNA is actually serious about promoting competitive matches among the Knockouts.

The fact this perception even exists is testimony to savvy marketing on TNA's part. It *is* serious about promoting serious competition among the women precisely because WWE is not. And it seems the fans are noticing.

Right now, the Knockouts offer fans something WWE television does not. At this stage of its existence—light years behind WWE—anything that distinguishes TNA from WWE is worth exploiting. As such, the Knockouts are much more critical to TNA's success than the Divas are to WWE's.

But make no mistake, the Divas can wrestle, too ... and the Knockouts can also be eye candy. □

ON ASSIGNMENT

"I'M JUST A good, honest Christian businessman that likes to make sure the employees toe the line."

It was an odd line for Jim Cornette to spout off, but those were the words that came out of his mouth on the April 24 episode of *Impact*.

Cornette was telling backstage interviewer Lauren Brooke about a new specialty match he had in mind for the Sacrifice pay-per-view. Lauren was taken aback by the way Cornette gleefully described how wrestlers would have to sacrifice "some bodies, maybe a few careers, and we might have a chance of sacrificing a *life*" in the "tangled mass of murderous medal, the sadistic structure of steel."

I guess Cornette was trying to say his heart was in the right place, even if his brain might be locked in a restroom somewhere between Louisville and Orlando.

Jim Cornette the embodiment of a good Christian businessman? Another word seems to define him more accurately considering his history with women: misogynist.

Cornette said he was "a good, honest Christian businessman." Well then, I'm sure that Jimmy C.—being the good Christian he is—is well acquainted with 1 Corinthians 11: 14-15. If not, allow me to recap:

"Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."

A woman's hair is an expression of her femininity. Several women I know would rather lose a finger than lose their hair. Take this pinky; just let me keep my ponytail.

Jimmy C. got his panties in a bunch, and lashed out at the TNA Knockouts, calling them a bunch of spoiled children who never had to pay their dues to earn their spot. There may very well be some merit to that, though girls like Velvet Sky, Roxxi Laveaux, and Angelina Love have been paying their dues a heck of a lot longer than TNA cares to acknowledge.

To teach the "spoiled" little girls a lesson, Cornette announced a "Makeover Battle Royal" for Sacrifice. The match would be an over-the-top battle royal with the final two women left standing squaring off in a ladder match. The winner gets a shot at the women's title. The loser gets her head shaved bald.

In other words, Cornette—the good, honest Christian businessman—arbitrarily made a match whose sole purpose is to humiliate one woman and rob her of her hair, which accords her "glory" in the Christian tradition.

I think Jimmy C. might want to set down the Good Book for a moment and pick up a dictionary, because if he looks up the word "misogynist," he might very well see his picture next to the definition.

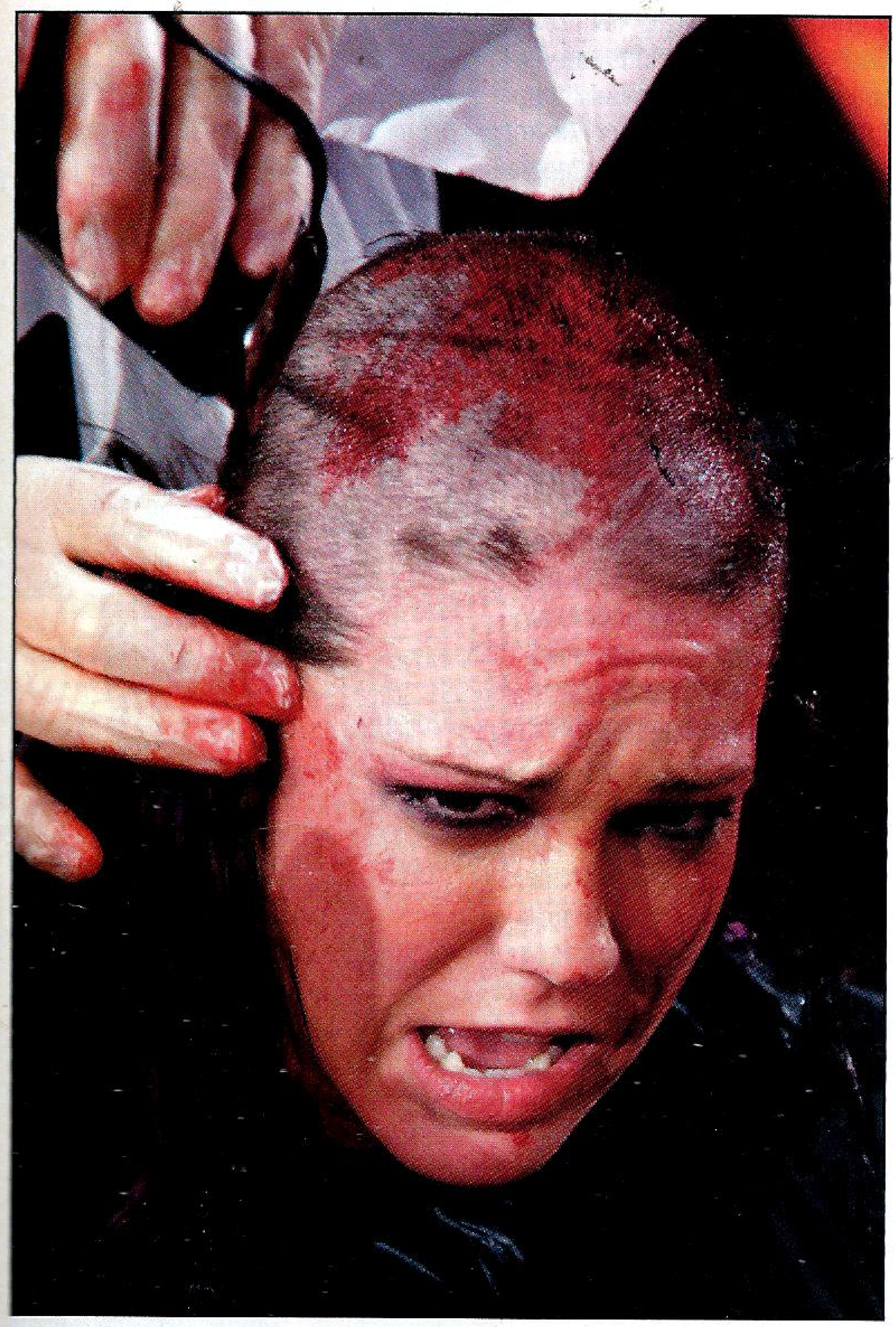
For those of you who may not have a dictionary handy (word of advice—buy one!), a misogynist is someone who has a hatred, mistrust, or dislike of women. I find it curious that on the same edition of *Impact*, Cornette identified himself as a good Christian businessman and then announced a match that is offensive to Christian sensibilities and actually makes very little business sense.

Christian businessman? Jimmy is wrong on both counts.

My intention here isn't to impugn Cornette's religious beliefs. Far from it. I just find it ironic that Cornette invokes the moral high ground on the very same night he makes a match that is both sexist and misogynistic.

Of course, Cornette's dislike of women is well documented. Back in 1985, "The Louisville Lip" provoked a

BY LIZ HUNTER



Being a good Christian, Jim Cornette decided to unleash a Samson-and-Delilah-style punishment on the TNA Knockout who lost the "Makeover Battle Royal" at Sacrifice. Hopefully Roxxi Laveaux, who left the Impact Zone bald, will not suffer the same loss of strength Samson did after his haircut.

fight with Sunshine in World Class Championship Wrestling. Sunshine actually beat Cornette in a one-on-one match that year. In the late-1980s, Cornette feuded with both Precious and Missy Hyatt. In the 1990s, he feuded with Tammy Sytch and Sherri Martel. Basically, everywhere Cornette has gone, he has had lady trouble.

My uncle Mike used to have a saying: "There comes a time when either everyone around you is a jerk, or you're the jerk." Considering Cornette's track record, it seems pretty obvious that he's the one who has issues dealing with self-confident, self-assured independent women. So, in a wrongheaded effort to try to force the TNA Knockouts to respect his authority, Cornette was forcing them to compete in a match where one lady is forced to suffer the ignominy of having her head shaved in front of a leering pay-per-view audience.

Maybe you think I'm making too big of a deal of a simple little stipulation match. If so, you're obviously not a woman. This isn't a run-of-the-mill stipulation. This is a premeditated attempt to humiliate a woman and rob her of her self-esteem and femininity, conducted under the pretense of being a sound business decision.

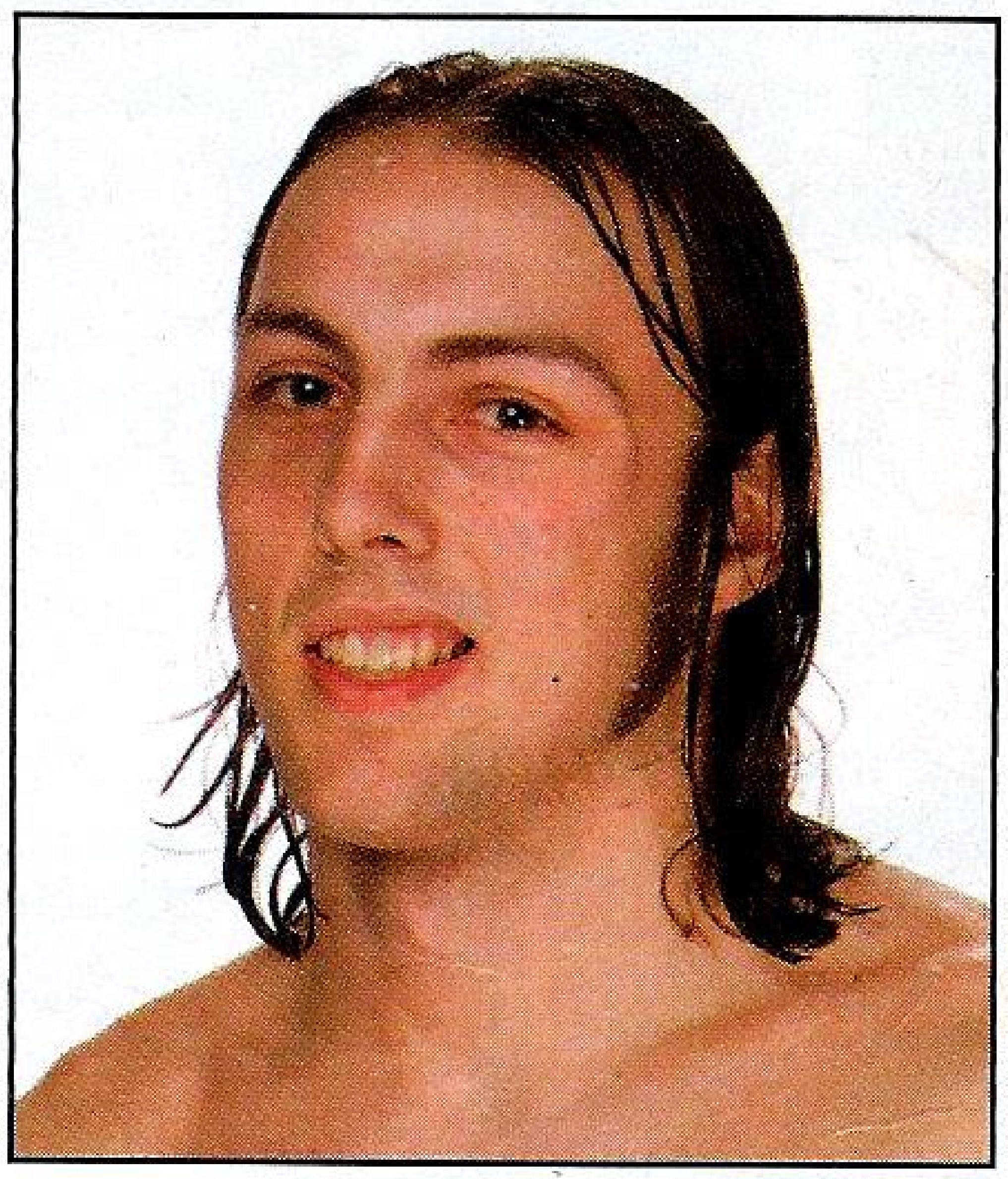
Jimmy, as a good businessman, could you tell me how many additional PPV buys the "Makeover Battle Royal" will add to Sacrifice? Or is it not about ratings? Perhaps it's about sending a message to the "spoiled" women you dislike so much. And what, pray tell, is the message you're sending: "Don't put forth enough effort to be one of the last two women surviving a battle royal when you can get eliminated without losing face while some other simple-minded chick loses the match and loses her hair?"

For the record, the winner was Gail Kim and the loser of much more than the match was Roxxi Laveaux. I wish all the women would have banded together, tied Cornette down, and shaved his head instead. As embarrassed as he would have been, it still wouldn't have been as bad for a man,

The Bible verse, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15, says a woman's hair is given to her as a covering to display her modesty. In TNA, it's not the women who need modesty. Cornette is the one who needs covering, but not the covering of modesty afforded by long hair. He needs to be covered up the way a cat covers its droppings in its litter box, because Jimmy C. is causing a heck of a stench in TNA. □

THUMBS UP

Thumbs Up to Mickie James. When no one seemed capable of ending "The Glamazon" Beth Phoenix's dominant run as WWE women's champion, Mickie James answered the call and dethroned one of the most impressive champions in the history of the division. During the contest, Phoenix imposed her will on James, who appeared headed for defeat. However, it was a rollup seemingly out of nowhere that cost Phoenix the gold and put James, once again, atop the women's division. With the victory, James moved in to a tie for second place with Lita for amount of title reigns, and trails her idol, Trish Stratus, who retired with seven runs.



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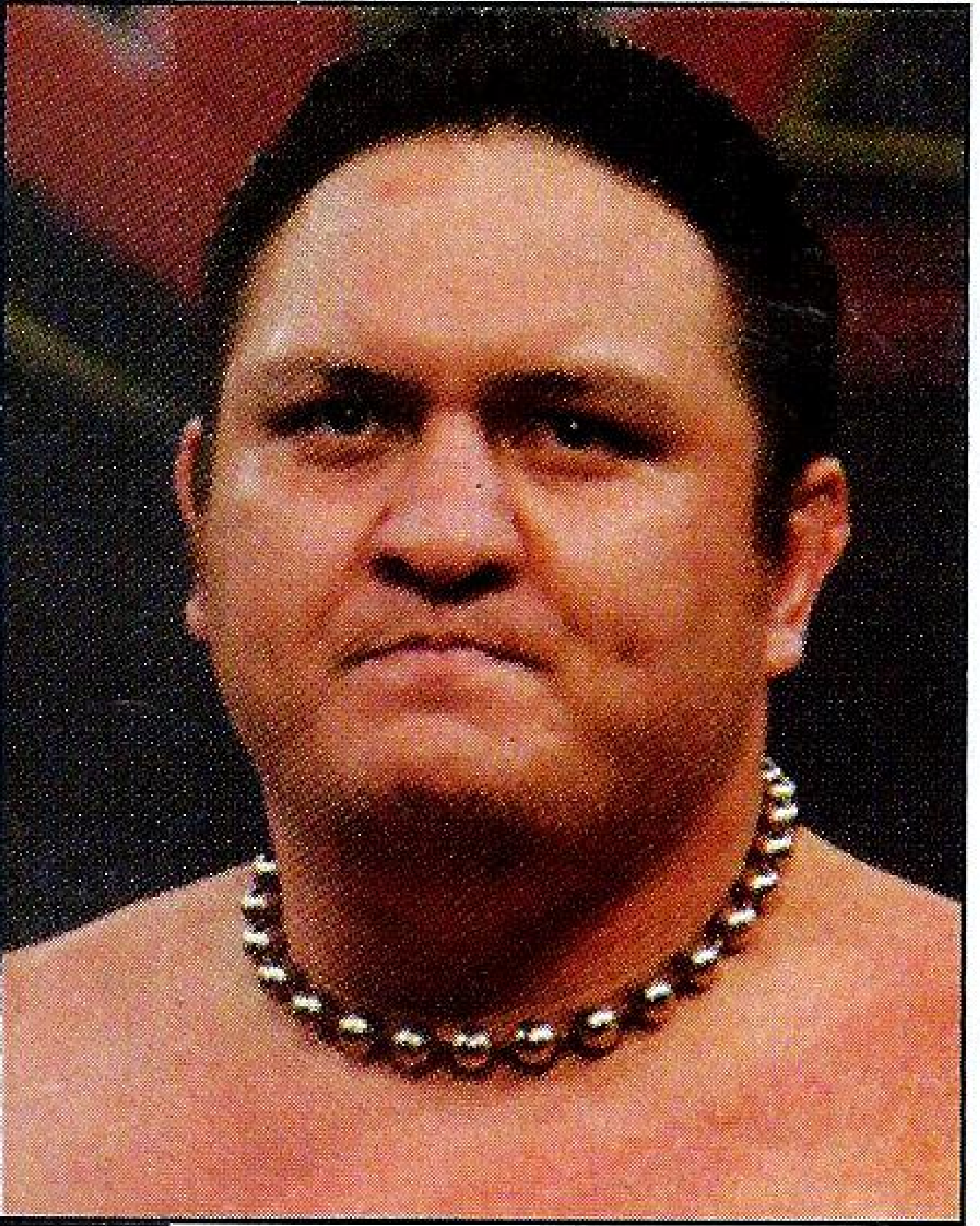
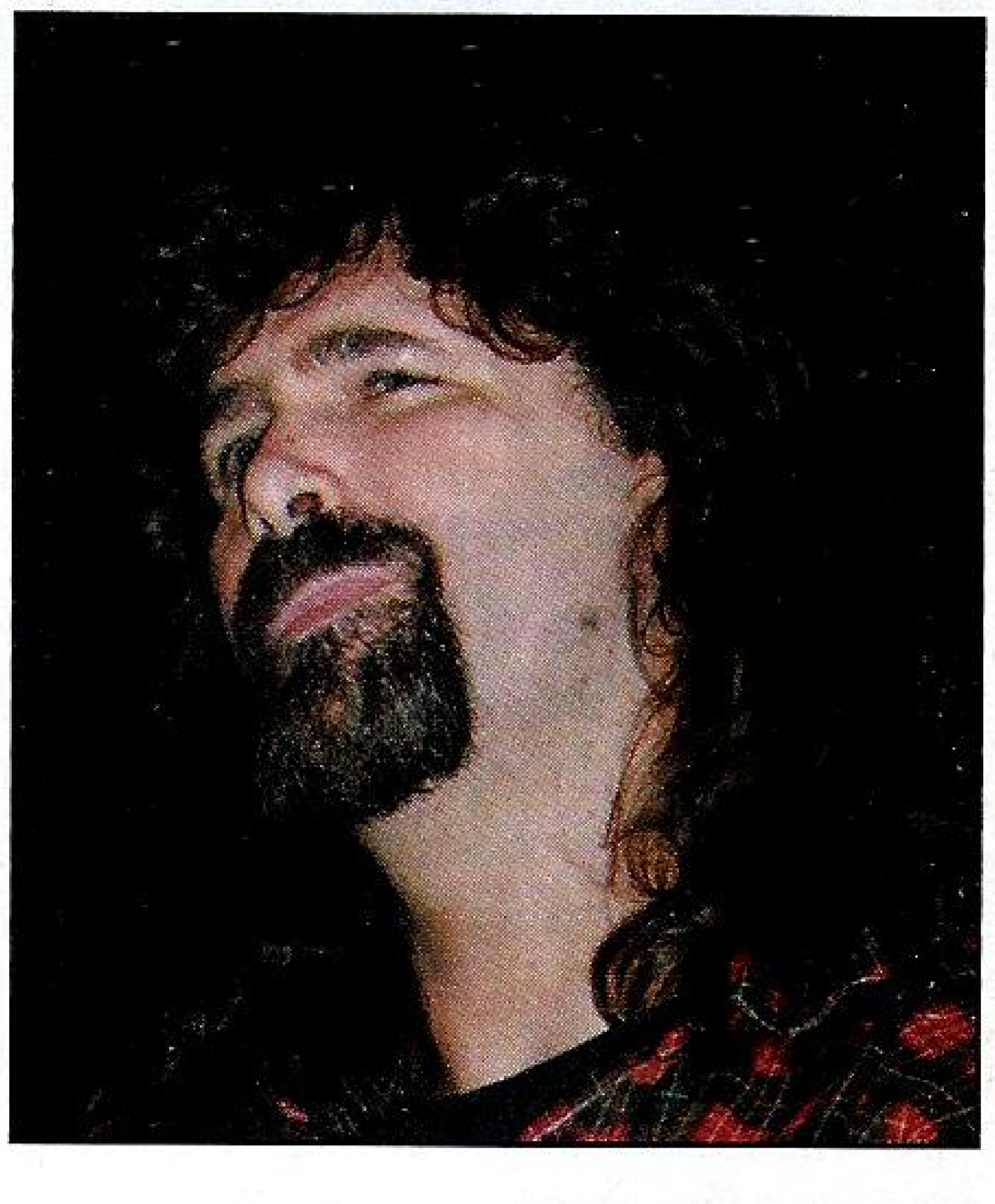
Thumbs Up to Colin Delaney. The odds were never in Delaney's favor when it came to winning his way into an ECW contract. Each week the tasks seem to get progressively more difficult, making even the most driven of competitors question their ability. But, to Delaney's credit, the youngster forged on and finally won that elusive first match and guaranteed himself an ECW contract. What made the victory most satisfying was that it came over none other than ECW General Manager Armando Estrada—the very man that was making Delaney's life a nightmare. He may never become ECW champion, but Delaney's tenacity garners him a massive "Thumbs Up."

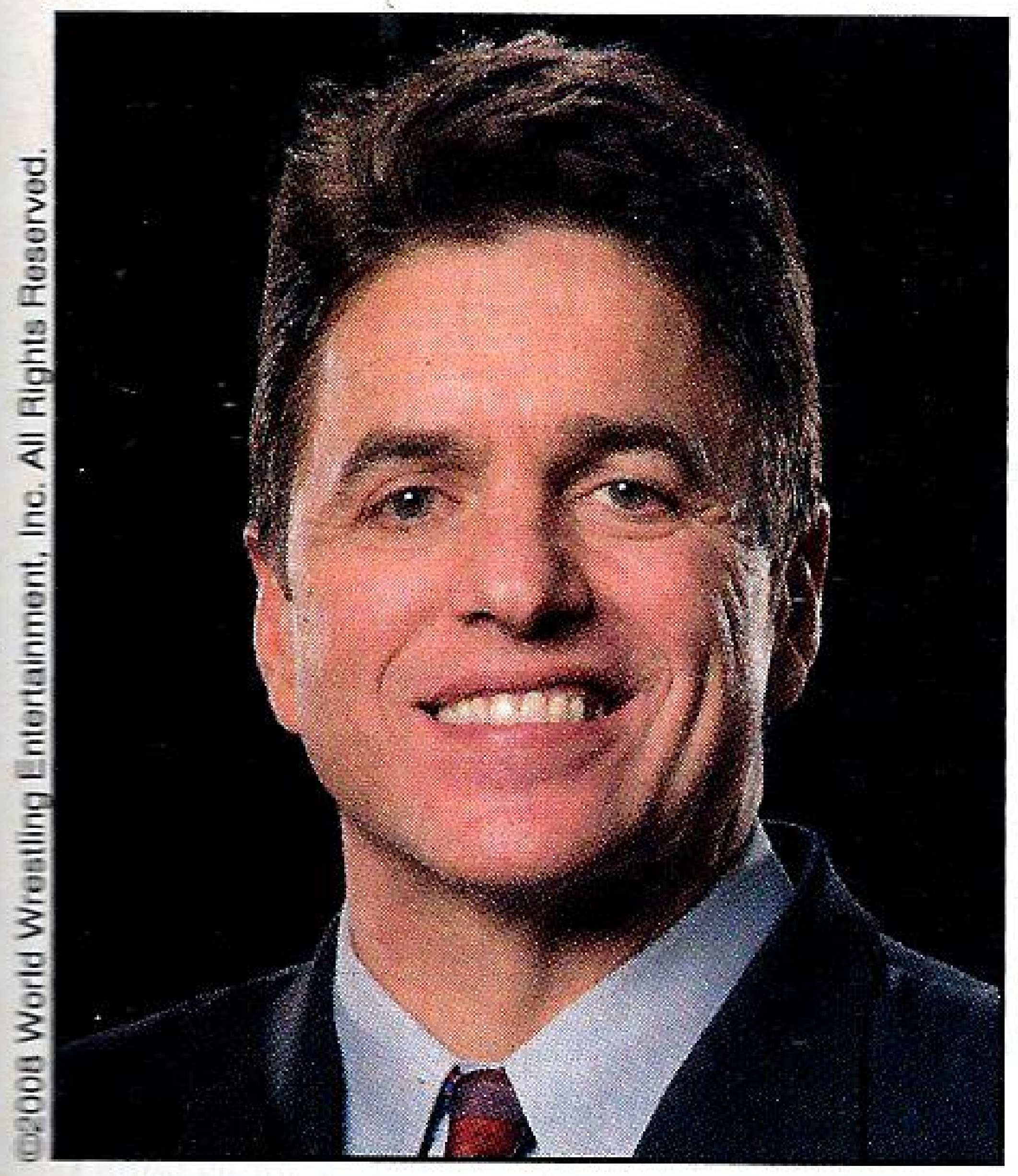


Thumbs Up to Samoa Joe. One of the perks of being the TNA World champion is having some say in who you face at Slammiversary's "King Of The Mountain" match. Going in, it would have been very easy for Joe to name his buddy Kevin Nash as one of his four opponents. But, once again, Joe chose the right thing over the easy thing. Big Kev thought he had an in and was none too pleased when Joe nominated Christian Cage, Rhino, A.J. Styles, and Booker T on *Impact.* Samoa Joe knew he'd have to answer to Nash, but he didn't let it stop him from making four honest selections. Thumbs up to a champ with integrity.



Thumbs Up to Mick Foley. Nothing against Jonathan Coachman, but there's something about Foley and his wonderfully eccentric take on the sport of wrestling that makes him infinitely more appealing as Smackdown color commentator than Mr. McMahon's former executive assistant. No matter how many times the man retires from the sport or swears that he'll only make the occasional appearance, Foley seems to come back. There will be no complaining here, as Foley may be one of the most entertaining and knowledgeable color men in the business, regardless of how long this stay lasts.

THUMBS DOWN



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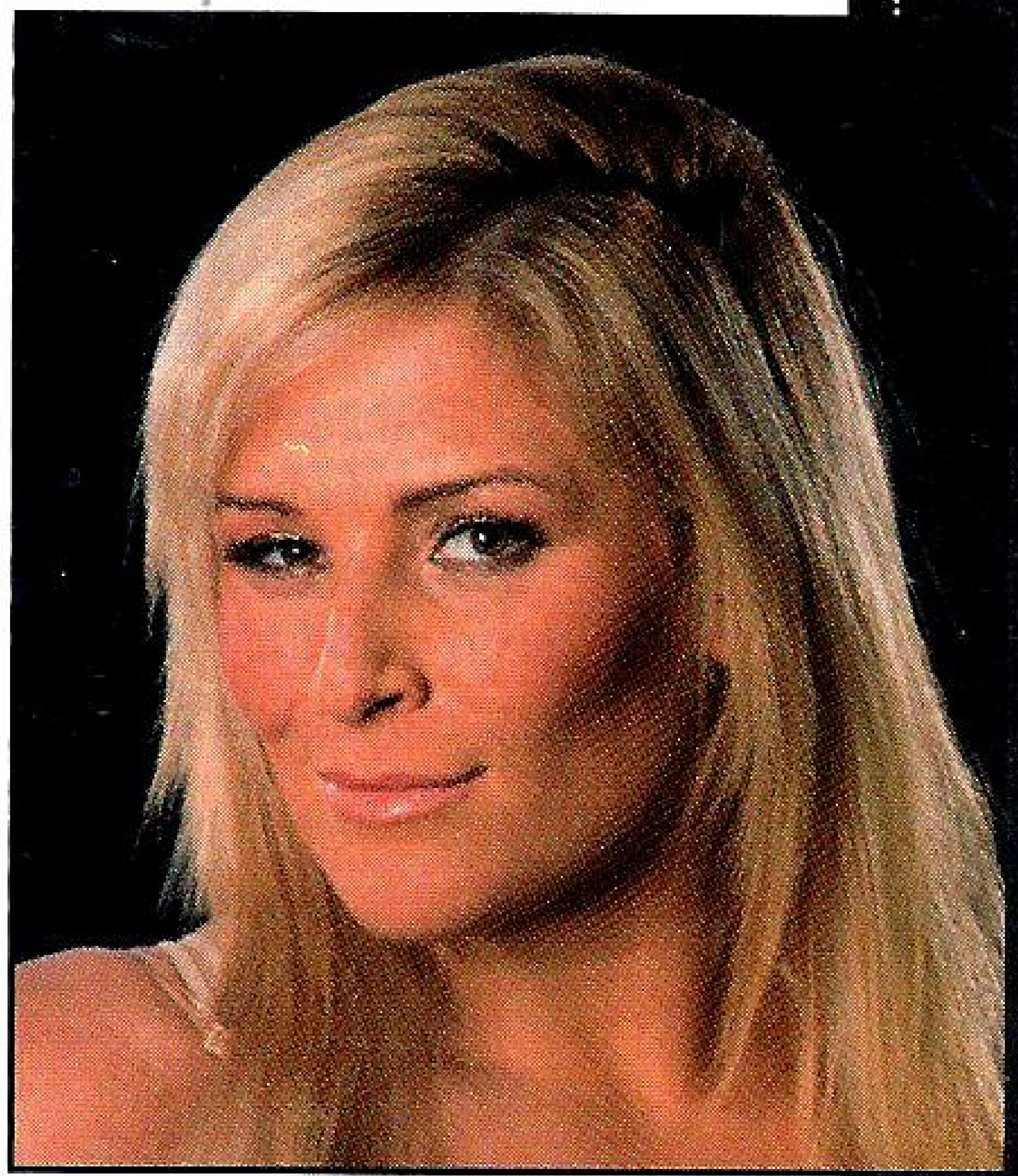
Thumbs Down to Mike Adamle. He has struggled so much as the new ECW lead announcer since replacing Joey Styles that when the heat from the fans became too much, he simply stood up and walked away—at the beginning of a main event! Adamle's unprecedented walkout prompted speculation and questioning throughout the industry regarding everything from his official role with the company to his mental makeup. One thing is certain, regardless of his rationale: Walking out on his duties and, more importantly, the fans, earns Adamle an automatic "Thumbs Down." It's going to take a lot for Adamle to dig himself out of the massive hole he allowed his ego to dig.



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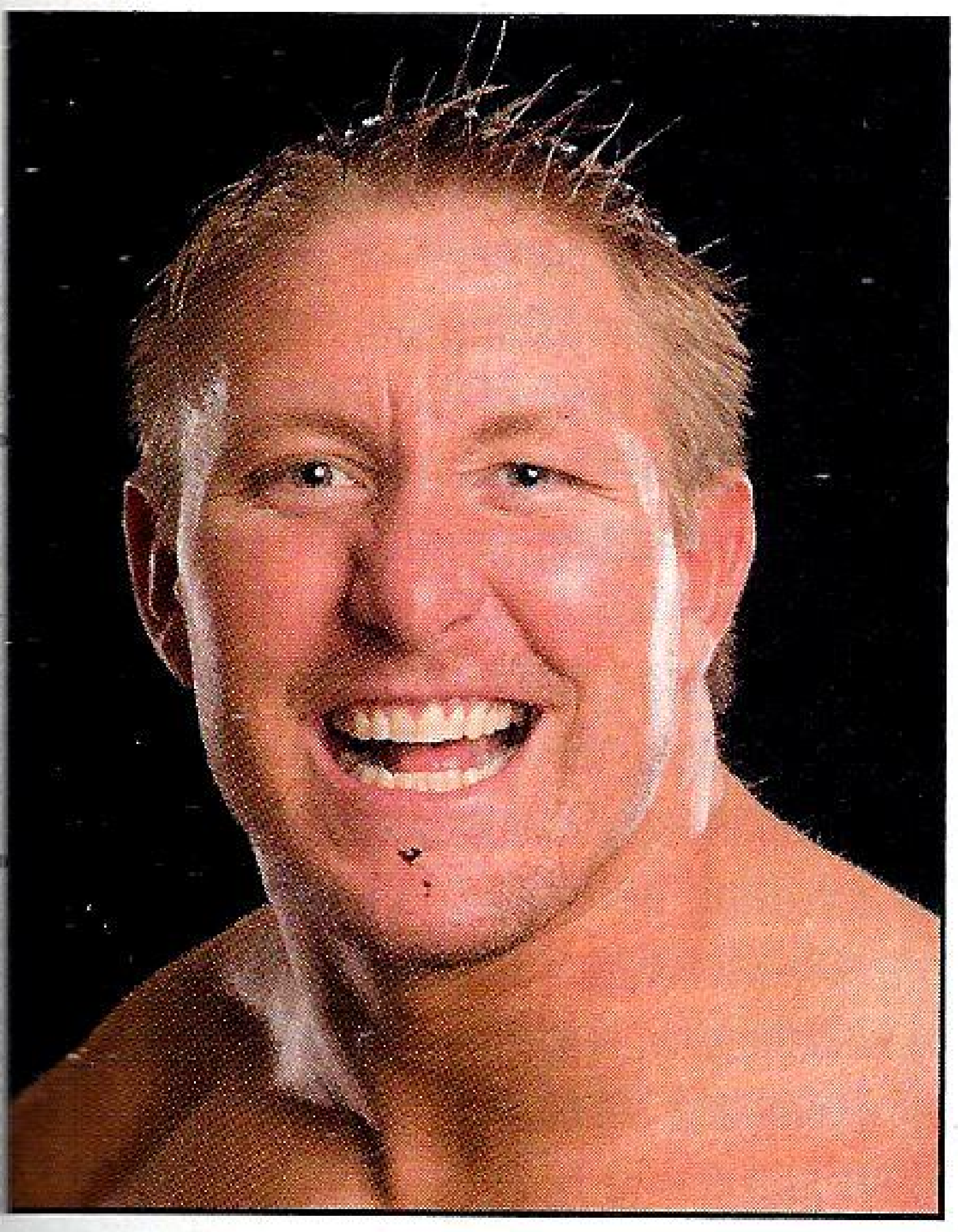
Thumbs Down to Natalya. As WWE's first third-generation Diva, we desperately want to give high marks to Smackdown's latest brutal beauty. But, after aligning herself with the likes of Victoria and Melina, it's nearly impossible to overlook such a poor choice in ally selection. With her family lineage and plenty of natural ability, Natalya seems like a lock to one day hold the WWE women's title. Yet, if she continues to keep the company she has since debuting with the Smackdown brand, the individual glory may come at a very steep price.



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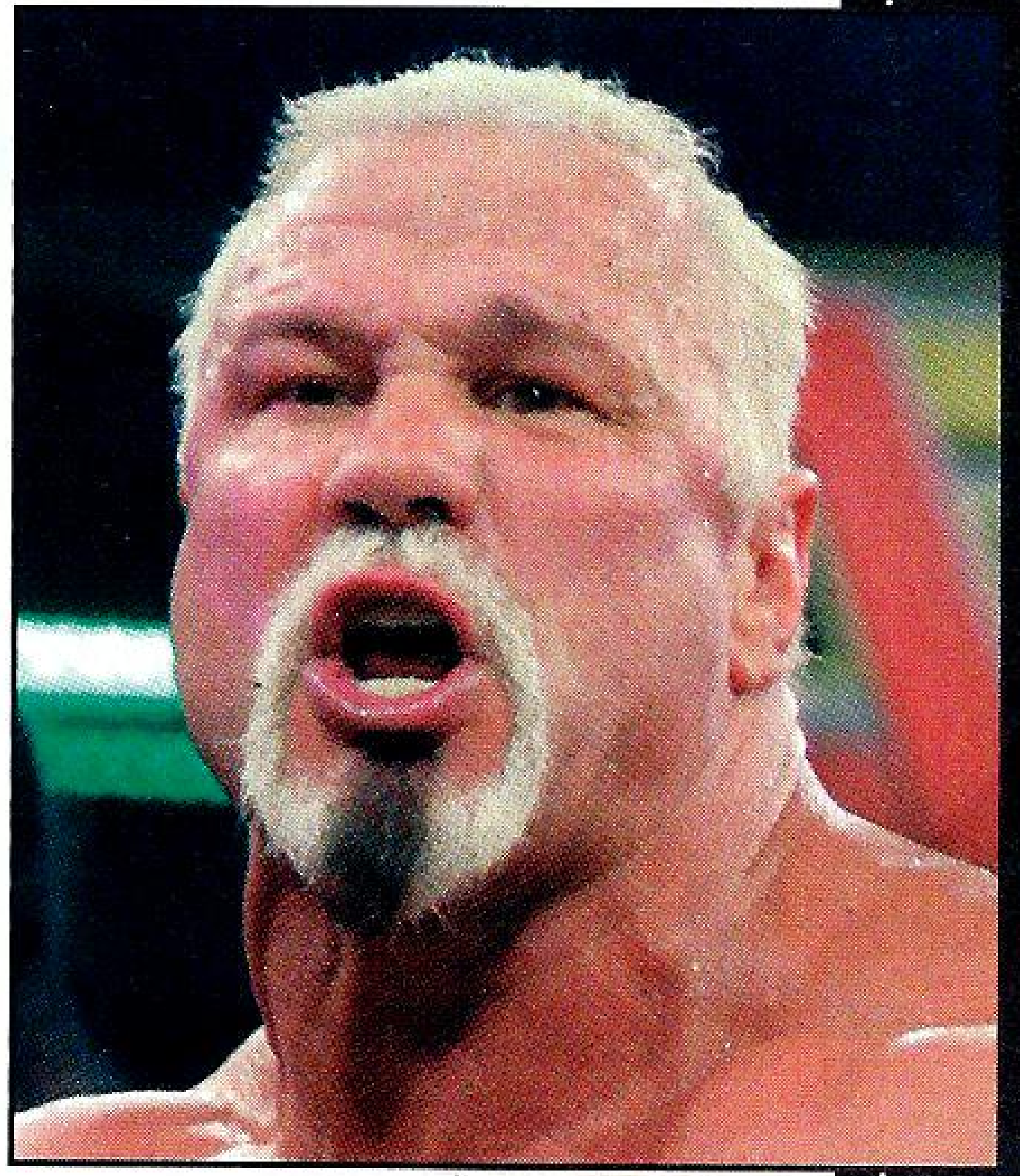
Thumbs Down to Lance Cade. He was never much of a team player, so the way he's treating longtime tag partner Trevor Murdoch shouldn't surprise anyone. Still, that doesn't make his utter indifference mixed with public berating any less disturbing. Holding the Raw World tag team championship three times, Cade and Murdoch were at one time the dominant tandem in all of WWE. However, a series of unfortunate misses and unforeseen occurrences—all blamed on Murdoch—kept Cade without the gold for longer than he could stand. Instead of working to recover the title, Cade seemed willing to simply jettison his partner in the hopes of chasing individual glory.



Thumbs Down to Scott Steiner. First, Steiner steals away one of the top X division wrestlers—Petey Williams—and changes him into his own, personal version of Mini Me from *Austin Powers*. Then he weasels his way into the TNA World championship hunt without having much of valid reason to be there, aside from simply wanting a shot. Steiner chose to hop into the Samoa Joe-Kurt Angle feud rather than face either man head-on. To make matters worse, Steiner attempted to recruit backstage help—namely Kevin Nash—in his illicit pursuit of the gold. Steiner continues to look for any shortcut he can find.

[POINT:]

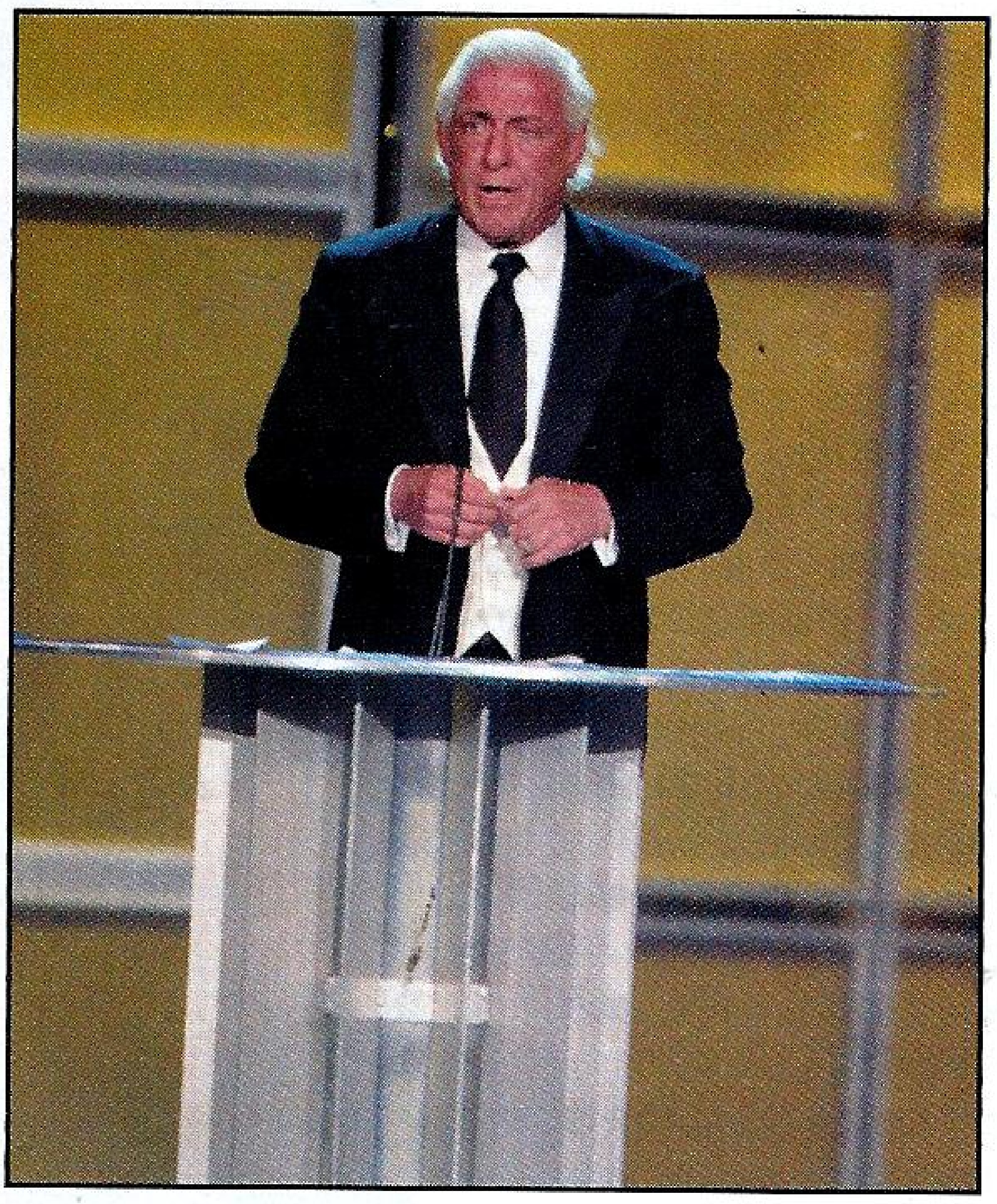
A YEAR HAS ALLOWED US TO SEPARATE CHRIS BENOIT'S HORRENDOUS ACTS FROM HIS GLORIOUS ACHIEVMENTS

BY AL CASTLE

IN THE LONG list of wrestling luminaries that Ric Flair acknowledged during his WWE Hall of Fame acceptance speech was one that took some observers by surprise. But as a longtime ally of Flair, and a former Horseman, it made sense that the "Nature Boy" would single out Chris Benoit.

Yes, Ric Flair said the name "Chris Benoit," and nothing much happened. There was no outrage, no catcalls, and no resentment directed at Flair for daring to utter the name that has caused so much hurt since that fateful June weekend in 2007.

On the contrary, in a room filled with thousands of members of the wrestling community, there was some clearly audible, if subdued, applause for a man whose exit from the sport, and from this world, was filled with tragedy and disgrace. And that's because, for most of the 40 years Benoit was here, he gave so much to the business he loved.



Contributing Writer Al Castle thinks Ric Flair's mention of Chris Benoit at the Hall of Fame induction ceremony and the mildly positive reaction of the audience is proof that time has given people the ability to differentiate between the two faces of Chris Benoit—legendary wrestler and murderous monster.

The reaction of the Orlando crowd to the mention of Benoit's name may be reflective of how the wrestling world as a whole has moved forward in the year since Benoit killed his wife, Nancy, and son, Daniel, before hanging himself in his suburban Atlanta home. It is not a matter of "getting over it"—an arguably callous sentiment. But rather, it is a matter of gaining perspective with time. And part of that perspective must include separating "Chris Benoit: The Wrestler" from "Chris Benoit: The Troubled Soul Who Did The Unthinkable."

Indeed, some of history's most iconic figures have had personal lives tainted by demons. Regardless of his reputation as a notorious racist, anti-Catholic, and violent, belligerent drunk, Ty Cobb is still regarded as one of the greatest baseball players ever to swing a bat—thanks in large part to a still unbeaten .367 career bating average.

Similarly, nothing should take away from the contributions that Benoit made to this sport. Benoit was not on pace to have just a good career—or even a Hall-of-Fame-worthy one. Among wrestling purists, Benoit was considered one of the very best of all-time—a technical virtuoso whose athleticism, drive, and intensity put him in the league of such wrestling greats as Flair, Antonio Inoki, and Lou Thesz.

Whether it was showing glimpses of being something special during his earliest days in Calgary Stampede Wrestling, wowing Japanese crowds under a mask as The Pegasus Kid, or achieving his lifelong dream by winning a Raw World title at Madison Square Garden at WrestleMania XX, Benoit's life was filled with too many great accomplishments to be defined by one horrific 72-hour period.

But more than just doing Benoit a disservice by dismissing all his great accomplishments, wrestling fans would be shortchanging themselves by neglecting a man who meant so much to this sport. We owe it to ourselves to recall, and replay the many great matches that Benoit gave us during his 20-year-plus career.

It may take some time, but perhaps the next time we hear Benoit's name mentioned at a WWE Hall of Fame ceremony, it will be during his own induction.

Al Castle is a contributing writer for The Wrestler.

COUNTERPOINT:

CHRIS BENOIT'S LEGACY WAS WRITTEN FOREVER ON ONE WEEKEND IN GEORGIA

BY LIZ HUNTER

CHRIS BENOIT MAY have done a lot of great things during his storied two decades as a professional wrestler. But none has left a mark as important as his final acts on this earth. Benoit will rightfully always be remembered as the man who senselessly killed his wife and young son before taking his own life in 2007.

Benoit's case is not simply one of an accomplished athlete with a dark side. For certain, every wrestling great has had personal faults that could make him less than admirable. But, Benoit's legacy may more closely mirror that of O.J. Simpson than it does Ty Cobb.

Despite his success on the gridiron, Simpson will forever be defined as the shadowy figure suspected of killing his wife and her friend 14 years ago. And there is a good reason for that. Among fans of a particular athlete, it may be easy to define a person as great simply for what he accomplished in his professional career. But the accolades achieved on a football field—or a wrestling ring—seem trivial when compared to what really matters: the love of family and the value of human life.

To celebrate Benoit's career is to lessen the gravity of what he did, and the hurt that it caused. While we may try to separate Benoit from his horrific acts, that separation may be impossible to many people who loved Nancy and Daniel Benoit, who, a year later, are struggling to cope with the pain caused to them by Chris Benoit's decisions.

What's more, the impact of Benoit's actions was felt far beyond his immediate circle of friends and family. The tragedy of the double-murder-suicide served to taint the pro wrestling industry as a whole and cause undue harm to the many honest and hardworking people who are part of it.

Indeed, the pro wrestling universe is one filled with light moments, colorful characters, and countless joys and thrills—all directed at putting smiles on the faces of its fans. There is no room in that world for the shocking and gruesome recollections from the final weekend in June 2007.

And so, while WWE officials' attempts to erase Benoit from the history books may seem overly callous, in fact, they may be doing us a favor. It's just fine for us to want to get back to our wrestling as we once knew it, but to do so, we must leave Chris Benoit behind—forever.

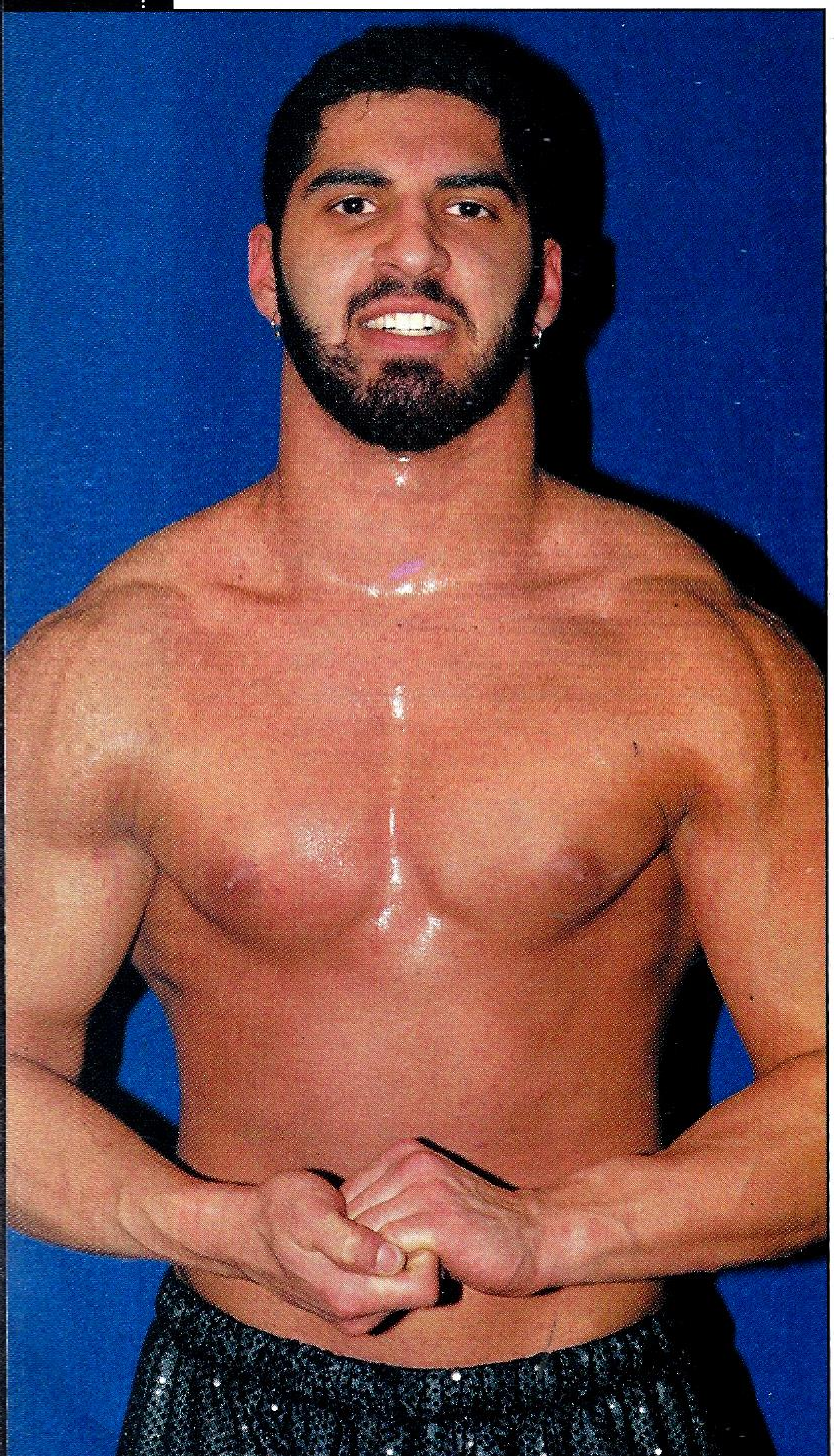
Liz Hunter is a contributing writer for The Wrestler. ☐

Photo by Merle Hamburger

Time does not heal all wounds, says Contributing Writer Liz Hunter, who insists that no matter how much time passes and no matter how badly we want to honor his in-ring accomplishments, Chris Benoit's legacy will forever—and fairly—be tarnished by that fateful June weekend on 130 Green Meadow Lane.

[INTRODUCING]

ARYA DAIVARI



IN 2004, SHAWN Daivari took a magic carpet ride to success in WWE. Now, the youngest Daivari brother is looking to travel that same path, possibly even sharing the limelight with his more famous brother. But, while Arya Daivari appreciates the doors that have opened for him due to his brother's recognition in the industry, Arya is eager to, ultimately, separate his budding reputation from his brother's.

Arya Daivari grew up watching the sport of wrestling alongside brother and future WWE star Shawn. The eight-year-old Arya would sit in front of the TV each week taking in his favorites from the WWF and WCW, flipping channels back and forth at the height of the Monday Night War, just dreaming of a day when he might get to step into the ring and take on some of his idols.

Less than 10 years later, Arya started turning that dream into reality when he enrolled at the Midwest Pro Wrestling school in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota, the summer before his senior year of high school. After studying under trainers such as Arik Cannon and getting hands-on experience from current WWE stars such as Ken Kennedy, Shelton Benjamin, and his brother, Arya received the kind of experience for which some wrestlers search their entire careers.

Now just 19—and with only about a-year-and-a half of in-ring experience—Arya is hoping to tread the path Shawn once took to become a future WWE star. In that short time, he feels he has come a long way.

"Probably my happiest moment was when my brother told me he was proud of how far I'd come," said Arya. "All of the hard work I've gone through for the past two years made it really worth it. Here was someone close to me who knew me but also knew what it took to make it in wrestling. And he was telling me that I was much beyond where he was at that age. That felt really good to hear him say that, because Shawn made it to WWE in about five years, which was very impressive."

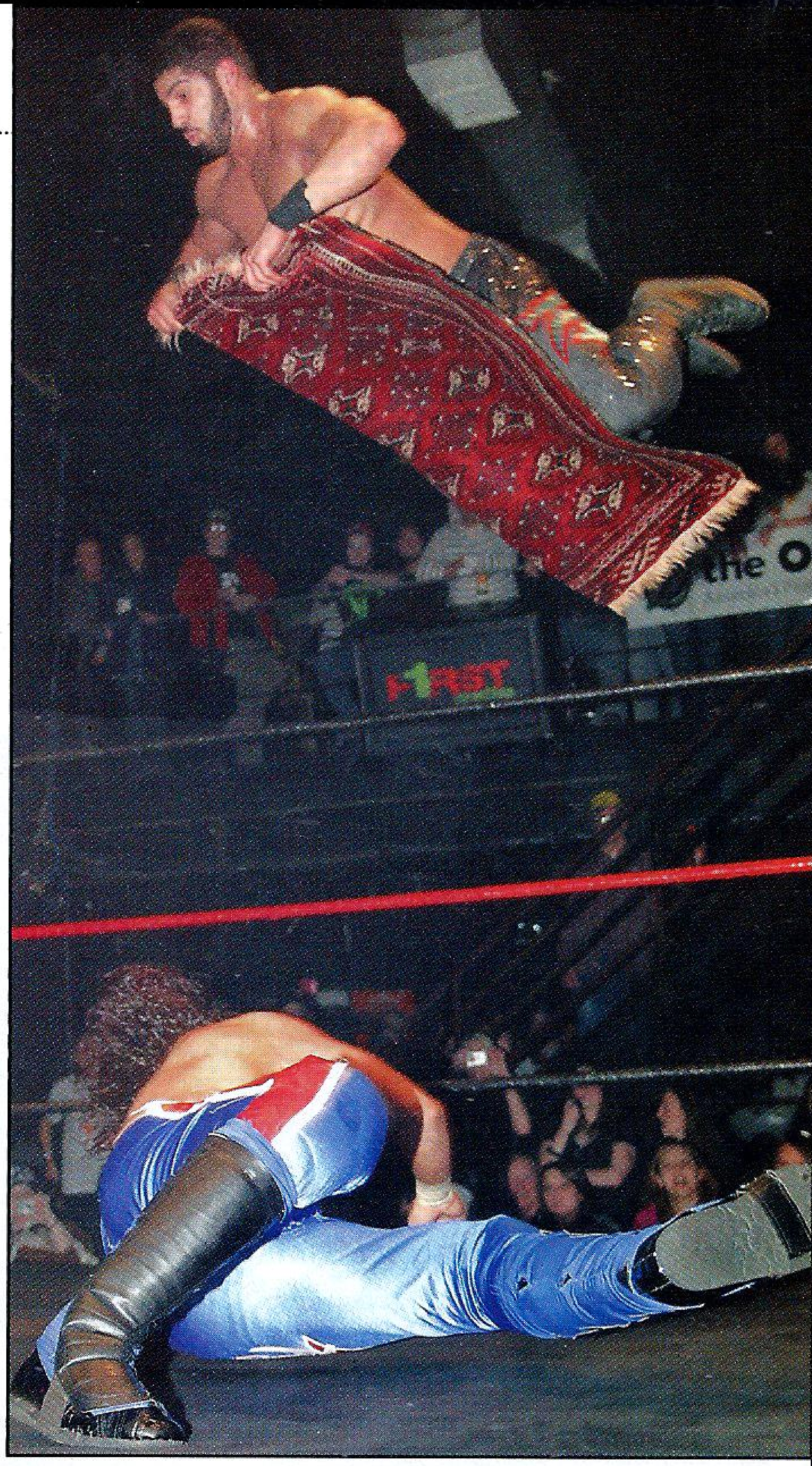
The Iranian-American also has a similar look and build as Shawn, who is five years older. Shawn was released from WWE in October 2007, but not before being in some hot storylines with Kurt Angle and The Great Khali. But it was Shawn's involvement in a controversial angle with Muhammad Hassan in 2004 and 2005 that really captured the younger Daivari's imagination.

At the time, Hassan and Daivari railed against what they perceived as discrimination against Arabs in a post 9-11 world.

Arya, like his brother, strives to fight racism against Arabs at every indy show on which he competes. "All you racist, prejudiced Americans make me sick to my stomach," he is often

BY BRADY HICKS

PHOTOS BY WAYNE McCARTY



Arya Daivari executes the move that carried his brother Shawn to success in the indies and then in WWE. Opponent Ryan Cruz struggles to escape, but the youngest Daivari's magic carpet ride is nearly as effective as Shawn's.

heard belting out before lapsing into an angry Farsi diatribe that few fans, if any, understand.

Though he has mixed feelings about piggybacking his brother's success, Arya recognizes that there is a lot of value in the name Daivari. "I'm really appreciative of all the promoters who have given me the chance to show off what I can do," he said. "Of course, I recognize that legitimately carrying the last name 'Daivari' opens a lot of doors for me. While they might just give me a shot because I'm Shawn's little brother, I always try to give them something to remember the name 'Arya' as well."

Hence the magic carpet ride, Arya Daivari's frog splash finisher onto his helpless opponent from the top rope while carrying a rug. At first, Arya was apprehensive about using the carpet as a prop in the ring, not wanting to steal another idea for which Shawn was known. It was only after prodding by promoters that Arya incorporated the move into his offense.

This came, of course, with Shawn's blessing. "Shawn was very excited to see me trying the same kinds of things he used to do. He and I are still very close," continued Arya. "We have been since I was very little, and it continues to this very day when we team up together in the ring."

In fact, Arya's favorite match of his short career saw the brothers Daivari team for one of the first times to take on The North Star Express for F1RST Wrestling in January 2008. "Shawn is at a whole higher level than me," Arya said, "but we still tore the house down and the crowd really seemed to love it. We'd only tagged together three or four times before that, but I loved how much chemistry we had in the ring."

Arya is hoping to someday make a splash as his brother's tag team partner in WWE. Currently, Arya competes in indies such as NWA: Wisconsin, F1RST, and 3XW, but he envisions a career path similar to Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels, Edge, Christian Cage, and Matt and Jeff Hardy in that each was considered a tag team specialist before breaking off on his own. "Shawn already has the name value with wrestling fans, and I know I could come along and compliment that very well because we have such similar looks and styles," said Arya. "As much is going on in the Middle East right now, I think the two of us tagging on TV every week could be a very marketable thing."

From the long-shot dreams of an eight-year-old fan hoping to wrestle one day with the WWF has grown a passion for becoming the best he can be and one day making a name—his own Daivari name—for himself.

"I was with Shawn a few years ago when he got his call from WWE and I was very excited for him," said Arya. "And while it was a great thing for him, I was a little jealous. I just kept thinking that it was my dream, to get that same phone call for myself some day.

"My dream was always to catch on with WWE someday. But, realistically, as long as I can call myself a professional wrestler, I'd say my dreams are being achieved every day. When I can't compete anymore, I want to look back on my career and say that the world of pro wrestling was my world." □

WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

The Ultimate Flashback

Over the more than quarter century I have been a WWF/WWE fan, there was one year I all but completely dropped out. It was 1989, and I had just about as much Hulkamania as an 11-year old could take. When Hulk Hogan began his feud with his *No Holds Barred* co-star Zeus, I turned in my wrestling fan badge.

But months later, something happened. My fifth-grade teacher at St. Nicholas of Tolentine in the Bronx, Rev. McNeal, loaned me a tape of WrestleMania VI and suggested I check it out.

I got home, popped the tape into my top-loading VCR, and watched the main event, in which The Ultimate Warrior took on Hulk Hogan in the "Ultimate Challenge." And then I watched it again ... and again ... and again. Over the past 18 years, I must have watched that match 200 times.

It may sound like a lot of weight to give a wrestling match, but I can honestly say it changed my life. That match not only re-established my love for pro wrestling, but it made me absolutely obsessed with the sport and set me on a path that would influence my career, my relationships, and most every other part of my existence. And it was all because of one man—The Ultimate Warrior.

I've had a lot of wrestling heroes over the years, but never was I as passionate about a performer as I was about the Warrior. It may be embarrassing to admit that today, but at the time, I was in the Warrior's key demo, and I bought into his shtick—the face paint, the rockin' entrance music, the colorful tights, the arm tassels blowing in the air—hook, line, and sinker. He was a superhero.

Over the years I've come to appreciate the finer points of the sport, and my tastes have leaned more toward the likes of Shawn Michaels and Ric Flair. But I must admit I reverted to my younger years when I saw the video of the Warrior's recent involvement in a Nu Wrestling Evolution storyline. I was even more excited to hear the Warrior was training for his in-ring comeback with the European-based promotion.

It's too bad the Warrior, in recent years, has been reduced to a punchline in the wrestling industry. No doubt, Warrior's extreme political views and nonsensical Internet postings have contributed much to the situation. But when I saw the video of Warrior's NWE angle, I looked past the conservative haircut, expanding waistline, and three-piece suit—and I saw my childhood.

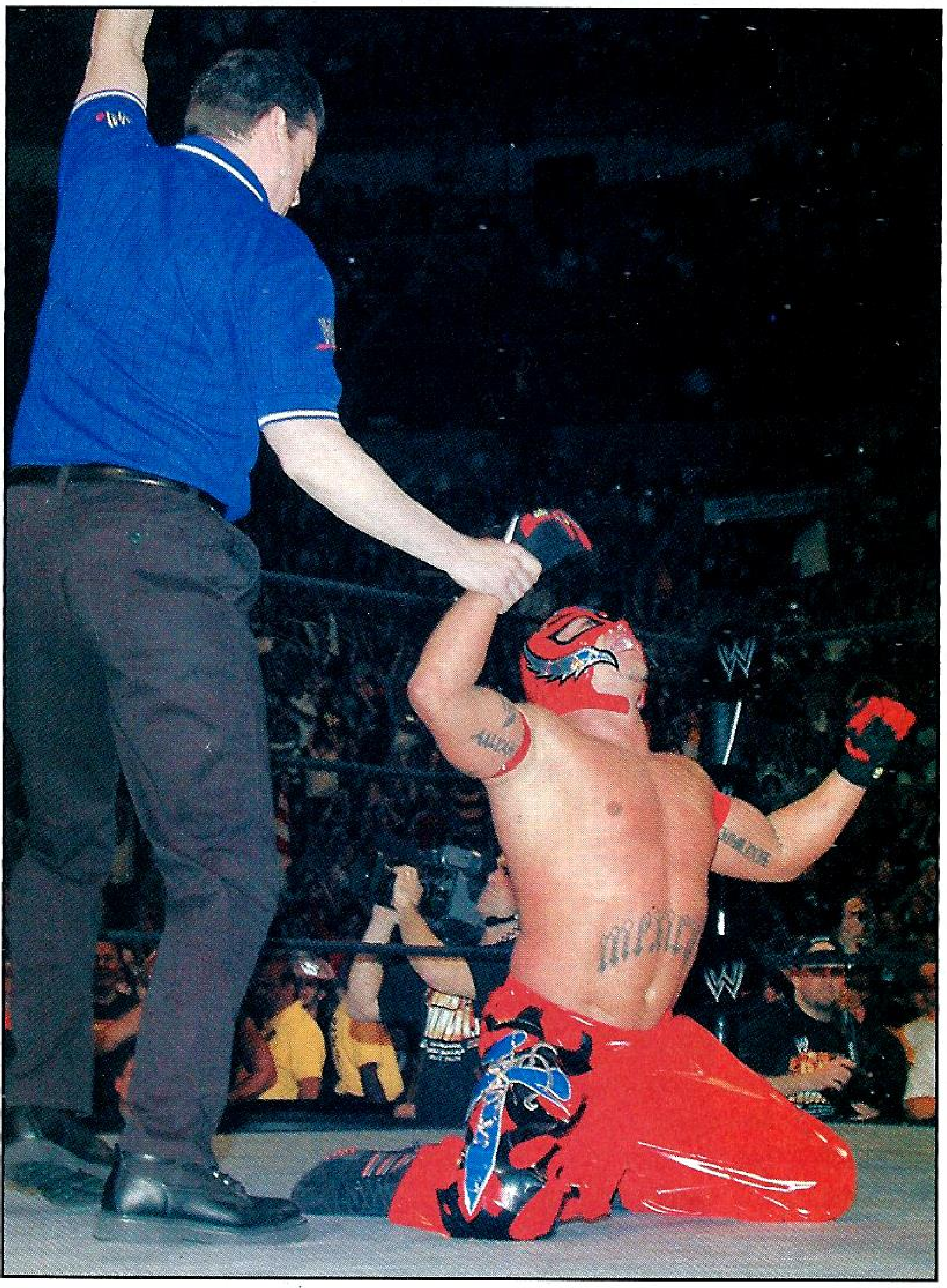


Photo by George Napolitano

In 2006, Rey Mysterio made headlines for winning the Royal Rumble. This year, Mysterio's in the news for being one of only three WWE superstars on the disabled list. This time last year, seven wrestlers were out with injuries. Al Castle feels WWE's Wellness Policy has made the difference.

What A Difference A Year Makes

A comparison between WWE's disabled list right now and a year ago is both revealing, and encouraging. Six of WWE's top stars—The Undertaker, Bobby Lashley, Triple-H, Edge, Ken Kennedy, and Rey Mysterio were all sidelined with injuries this time last year, while John Cena was still a few months away from going down to an arm injury.

A year later, WWE's DL includes only Mysterio (who may be back in the ring by the time you read this), Gregory Helms, and Candice Michelle.

Could the relative good health of the WWE locker room be a reflection of the company's embattled Wellness Policy finally taking hold? Perhaps not so coincidentally, as WWE's number of muscle-related injuries has decreased, the number of high-profile suspensions has increased.

If the two are related, then maybe WWE is finally realizing a Wellness Policy with teeth will not only keep the sinister media at bay, but it will also keep the roster healthy and productive.

Photo by George Tahinos

Nigel McGuinness and Claudio Castagnoli participate in Ring of Honor's obligatory pre-match handshake. It was at this May 10 show that ROH debuted in the Manhattan Center's prestigious Hammerstein Ballroom, another step up in Ring of Honor's budding reputation.

Home Is Where The Heart Is

Just across the street from Madison Square Garden in the heart of New York City is a building with a lot less notoriety than MSG, but with its share of wrestling history.

It was in the Manhattan Center that the very first Monday Night Raw was taped in 1993, where the final pay-per-view from the original ECW was held in 2001, and where Rob Van Dam won the Raw World championship in 2006.

Most recently, Ring of Honor has been keeping that tradition alive in the Manhattan Center, where for years the company has been regularly holding shows in the building's Grand Ballroom.

Recently, I witnessed another chapter in the building's rich wrestling history when ROH debuted in the larger, more prestigious Hammerstein Ballroom with one of its biggest shows to date. While the Manhattan Center debut might be more significant for Ring of Honor than for the arena, the occasion became a part of the venue's historical timeline nonetheless.

Performing in the same venue as Guns 'n' Roses, Bob Dylan, and Madonna once did were two world-class artists in their own right—Nigel McGuinness and Claudio Castagnoli—who competed for the ROH title in the main event. More than 2,000 fans shook the building in appreciation of the card, an obvious indication they took well to their new, storied surroundings.

It was an exciting night for ROH and its fans, and hopefully another step in ROH's ongoing journey to becoming a force in this business.

The End Of Another Era?

It was a sign of the times in 2006, when I went shopping for the official WrestleMania 22 VHS cassette—like I've done for each year's 'Mania video release—and learned that it didn't exist.

Of course, I had a DVD player and planned to buy the disc as well, but I couldn't help feeling a bit bummed that the era of wrestling on my VCR was officially over.

Now, I can't help but wonder if the days of pro wrestling on DVD are numbered as well. This is the first year that, in addition to picking up the DVD of WrestleMania, I'll be purchasing the high-definition Blu Ray disc of the event.

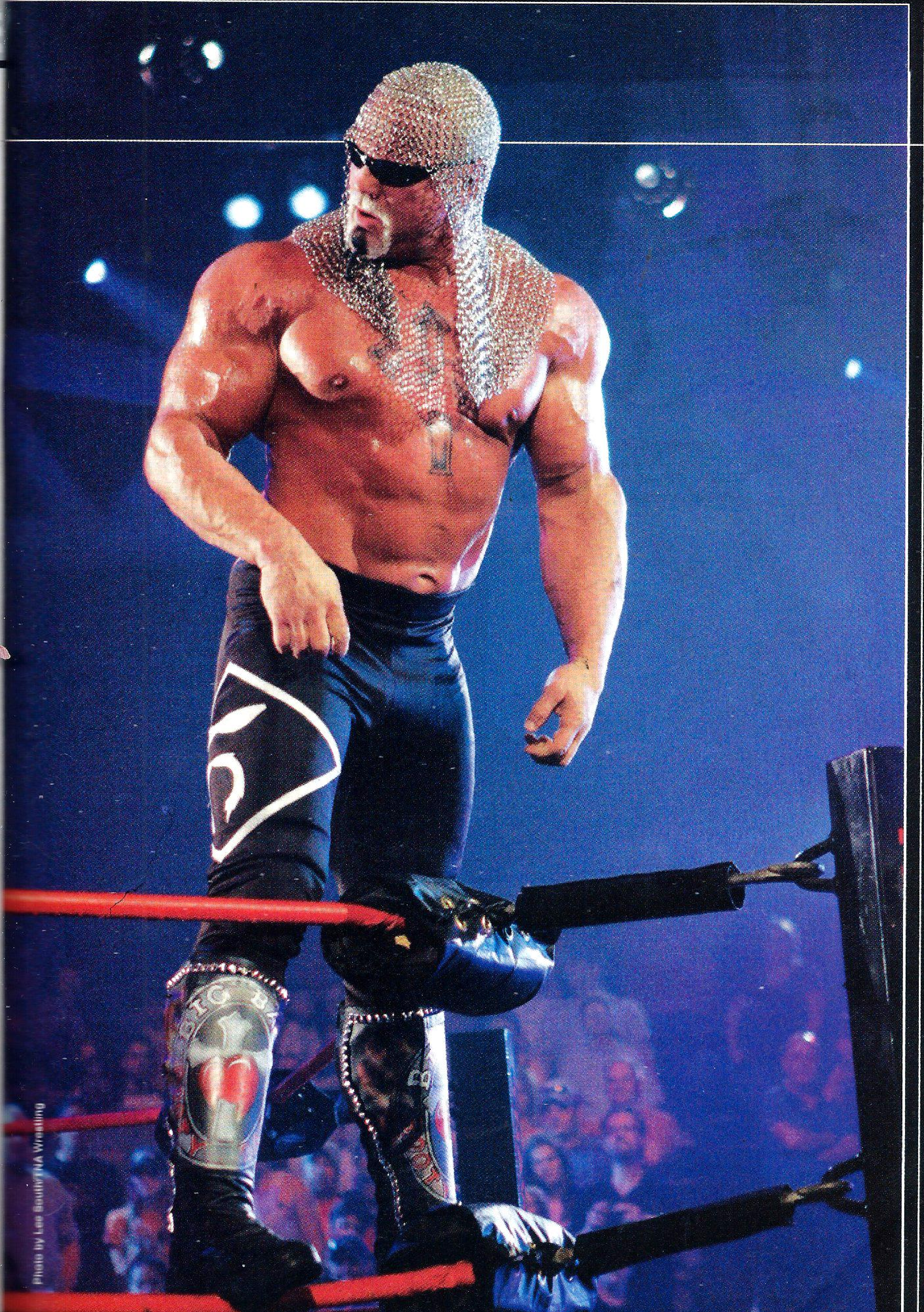
Just as DVDs made us wonder how we ever watched VHS, we are likely just a few years away from finding standard DVDs unwatchable. I, for one, am thrilled WWE is embracing the HD home video age. And I can't wait to watch Shawn Michaels mouth "I'm sorry. I love you," to Ric Flair in crystal-clear picture quality. ☐

SPOTLIGHT ON . . .

SCOTT STEINER

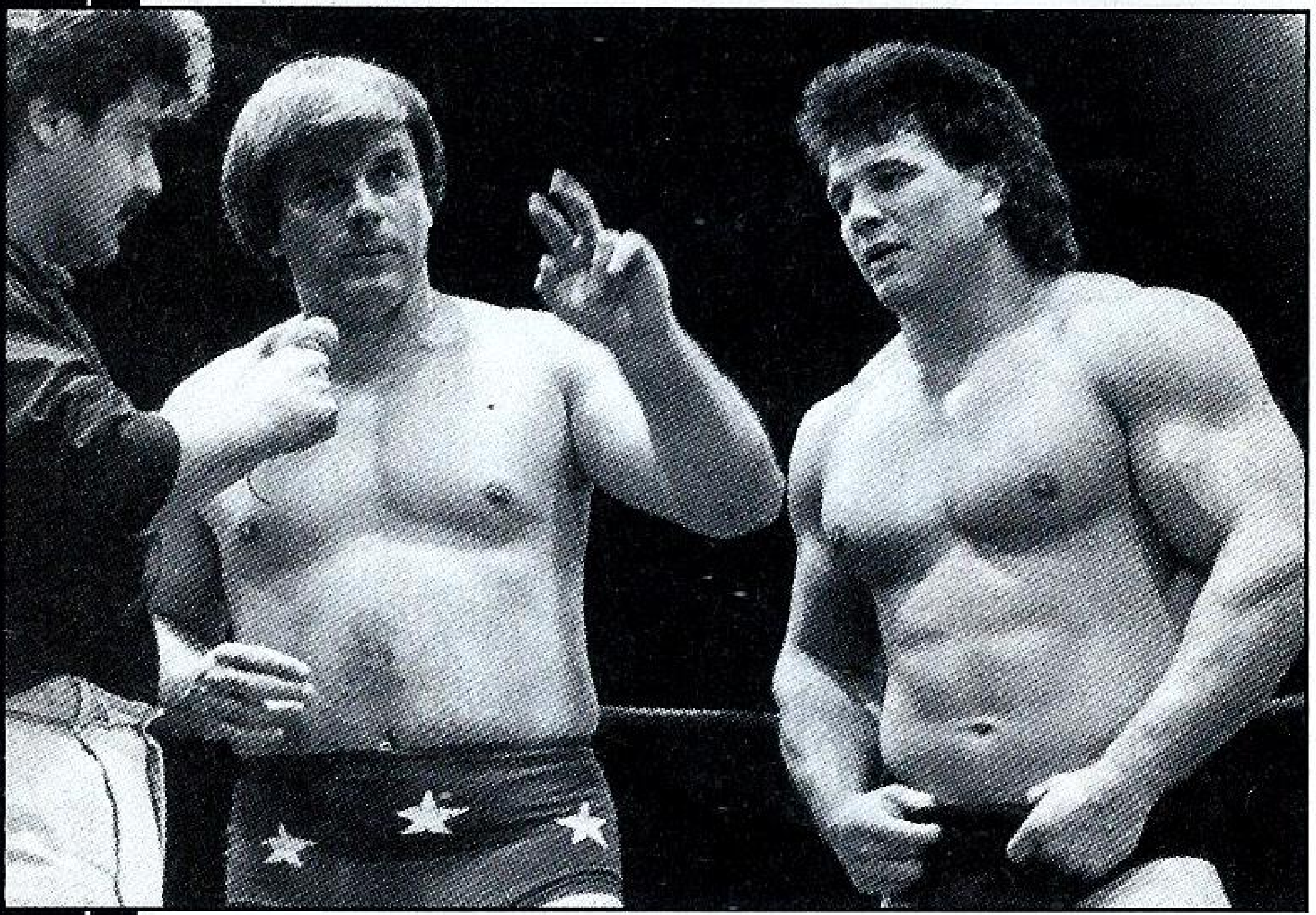
AN ALL-AMERICAN University of Michigan wrestler, Scott Steiner enjoyed a great deal of NCAA success before joining the Indiana-based World Wrestling Association in 1986 … Defeated The Great Wojo for the WWA heavyweight title on August 14, shortly after his debut … He held on to the belt until the following May … Teamed up with Jerry Graham Jr. for a two-month WWA tag title reign … Spent the next year competing for the Continental Wrestling Association, where he would become a three-time tag champion … Debuted for the NWA/WCW in the latter half of 1989 … Teamed up with his brother, Rick, who had already found singles success in the organization … The Steiner Brothers captured the NWA Mid-Atlantic tag team title on November 1 by defeating The Fabulous Freebirds … Won the Pat O'Connor Memorial tag team tournament a month later … Rick and Scott were voted *PWI*'s Tag Team of the Year for 1990 … The duo dominated all comers until May, when they fell to Doom at WCW's Capital Combat pay-per-view … Beat The Midnight Express for the NWA U.S. tag team championship … When WCW and the NWA parted ways in January 1991, The Steiners became the de facto WCW U.S. tag champs … Scott pinned WCW World champion Ric Flair in a non-title "gauntlet" match, ensuring him a title shot at Clash of the Champions XIV … The match went to a time-limit draw … On February 18, The Steiners defeated The Freebirds to capture the WCW tag title … Bested Hiroshi Hase and Kensuke Sasaki to capture the IWGP tag title at WCW's special Starrcade show at the Tokyo Dome … Defeated Sting and Lex Luger at SuperBrawl to retain the tag title … This bout would go on to win *PWI*'s Match of the Year honors for 1991 … Scott suffered a torn biceps after being attacked by Dick Slater and Dick Murdoch … The injury required surgery and WCW stripped The Steiners of the title that July, while Scott Norton replaced Steiner as one half of the IWGP tag champs … Rick and Norton lost the title to Hiroshi Hase and Keiji Muto

August 1986: Competing as Scott Rexsteiner in the Indiana-based World Wrestling Association, Steiner defeats The Great Wojo to win his first title.



SCOTT STEINER

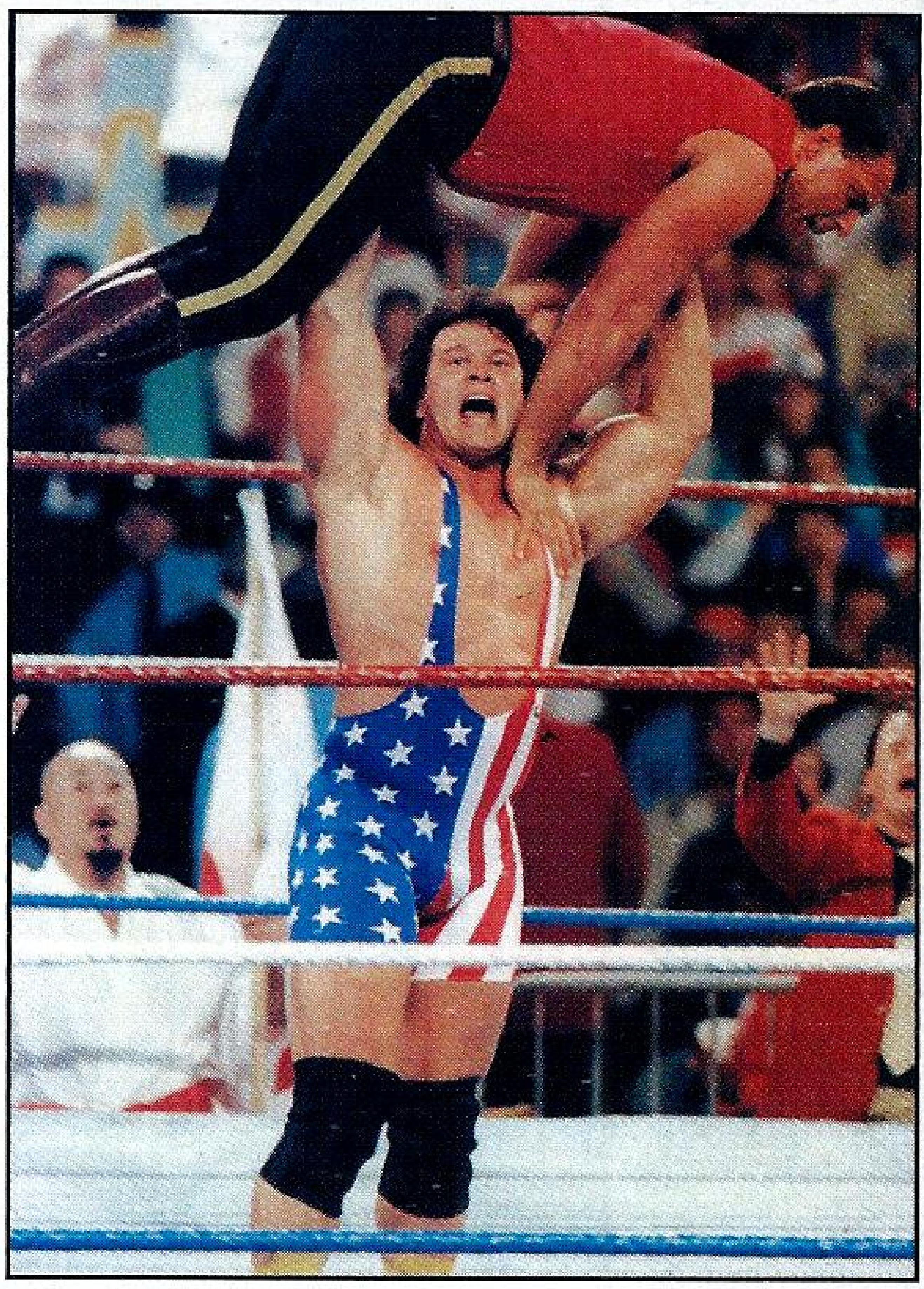
Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



October 1987: Even early in his career, Steiner shows an affinity for tag team wrestling. He and Jerry Graham Jr. team to capture the WWA heavyweight tag team title.

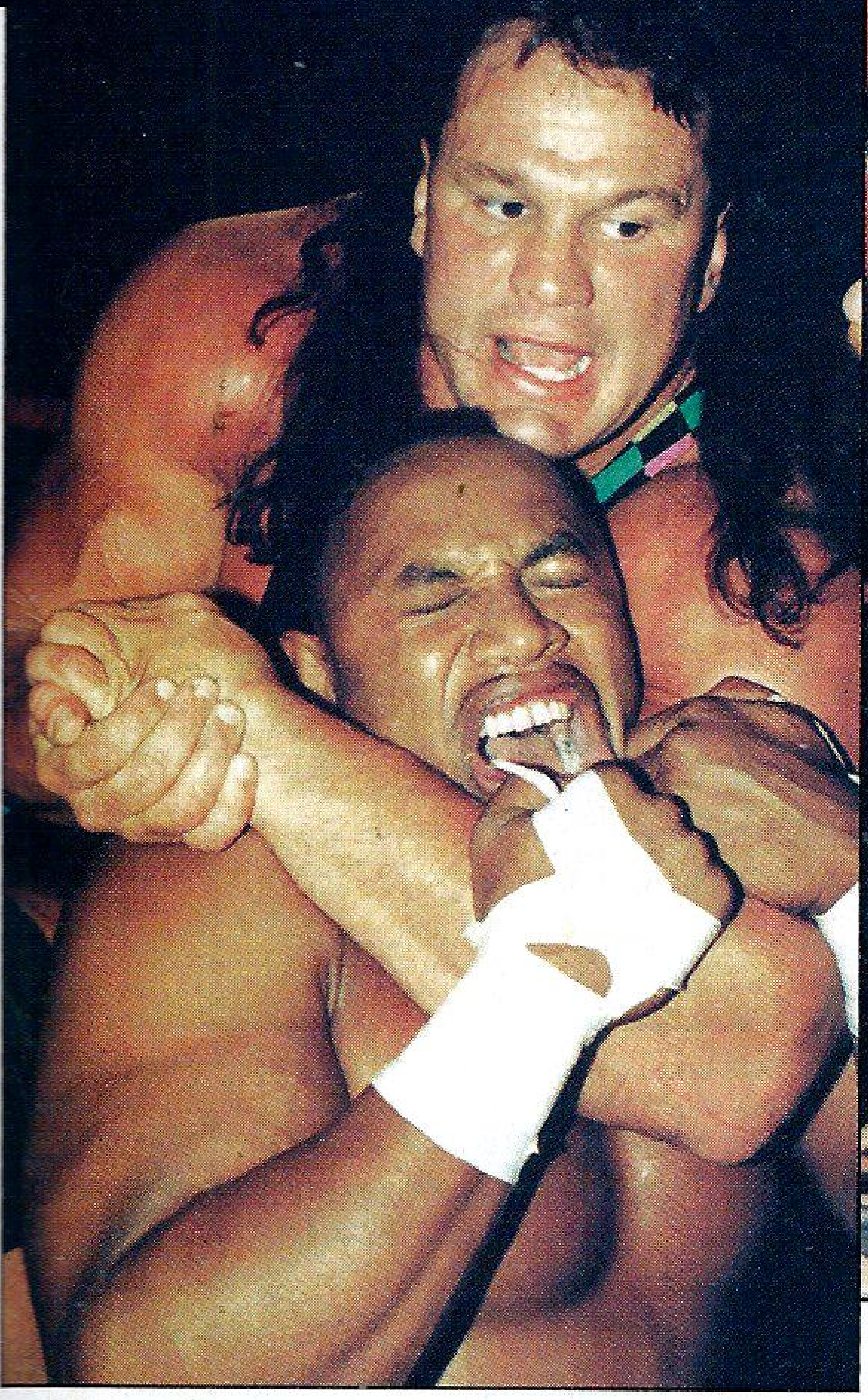
Photo by Koichi Yoshizawa

March 1991: Teaming with his brother Rick, The Steiners defeat Hiroshi Hase and Kensuke Sasaki to win the first of two IWGP international tag team titles.

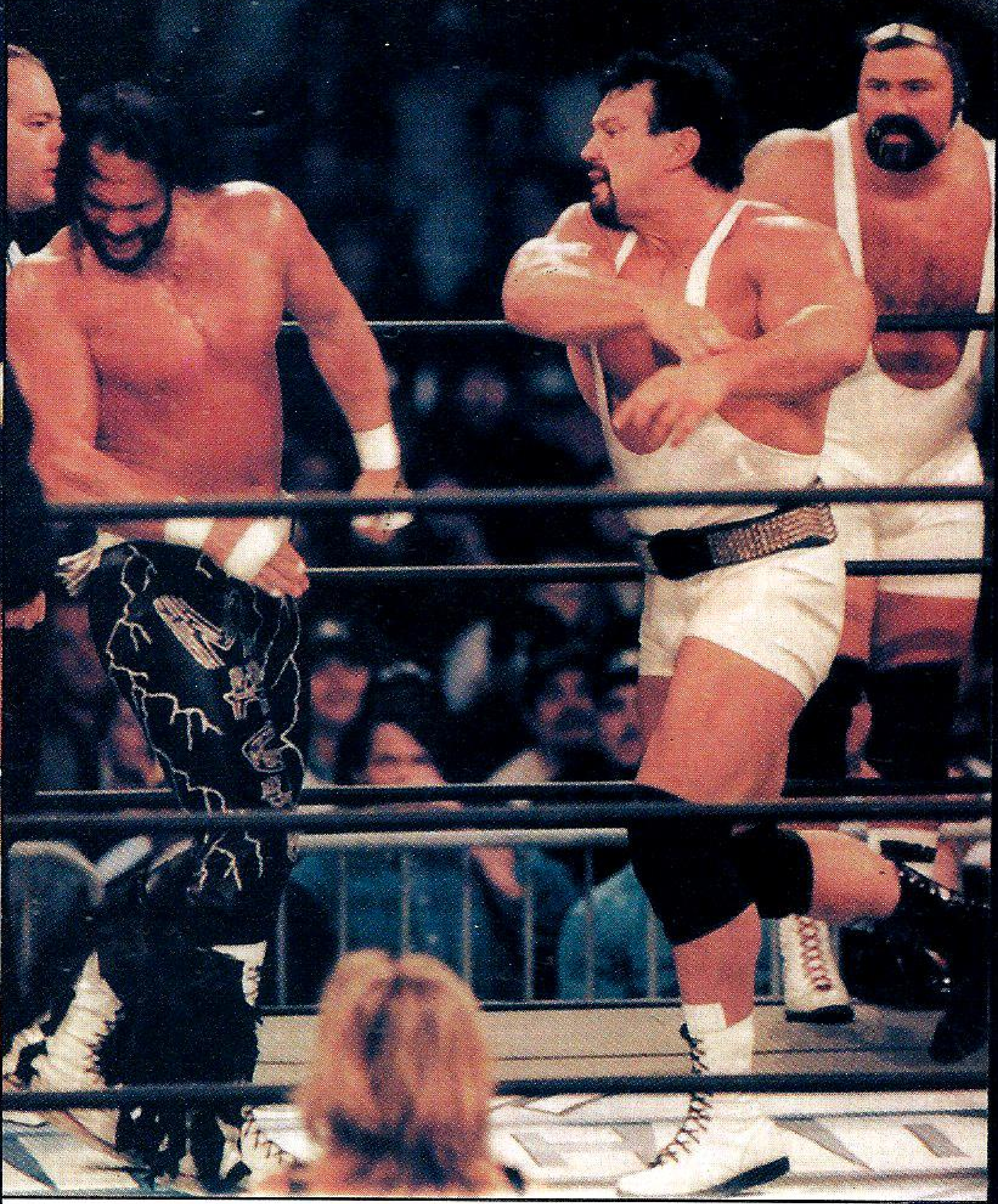


November 1993: Showing his immense strength, Steiner hoists Quebecer Jacques Rougeau overhead. The Steiners and Quebecers feuded over the tag title late in The Steiners' WWF run.

on November 5 ... Scott made his return to WCW in the fall ... The Steiners challenged Arn Anderson and Bobby Eaton for the WCW tag title at SuperBrawl '92, but lost the match by disqualification ... They would defeat Anderson and Eaton for the championship on May 3 ... Regained the IWGP tag title by defeating Vader and Bam Bam Bigelow the following month ... Lost the tag championship to the team of Terry Gordy and Steve Williams ... Rick soon left WCW ... The two would continue to dominate in Japan through late-fall ... Defeated Rick Steamboat for the WCW television championship in late-September ... That title would also soon be vacated ... Early in 1993, The Steiners arrived up north in the WWF ... The team won its first major TV match, against The Executioners ... Feuded with The Beverly Brothers, whom they defeated handily at the Royal Rumble ... Defeated The Headshrinkers at WrestleMania IX, after Scott used his patented Frankensteiner ... Spent the remainder of the spring and summer tying up with Money Inc. ... The Steiners defeated Money Inc. for the WWF World tag title on June 14 ... The title changed hands two more times that week, with The Steiners reigning as champions in the end ... Defeated The Heavenly Bodies at SummerSlam to retain the belts ... Lost the title to The Quebecers on the September 13 episode of Raw in a "Quebec Rules" match, following the interference of Johnny Polo ... Shortly into 1994, the team's run in the WWF ended ... The Steiner Brothers headed for Philadelphia and ECW in the summer of 1995 ... Feuded with 2 Cold Scorpio and members of the Dudley family, among others ... The ECW run was over by year's end ... Rick and Scott packed up and made their return to WCW ... Feuded with Harlem Heat, briefly, then entered into an ongoing conflict with The Outsiders, racking up four more WCW tag title reigns in the next year-and-a-half ... Scott shocked fans by turning against his brother at SuperBrawl VIII and joining the NWO ... Dyed his hair blond and took on the name "Big Poppa Pump" ... Won the TV title for a second time on the New Year's Eve episode of *Thunder* ... Would hold the belt until March's Uncensored pay-per-view, where he lost it to Booker T ... Got his revenge by defeating Booker T at Spring Stampede to win the vacant U.S. championship ... Beat Buff Bagwell by submission at Slamboree ... Was forced to vacate the U.S. title later that summer when a back injury kept him out of action ... Tricked fans into thinking he had retired from in-ring action during a

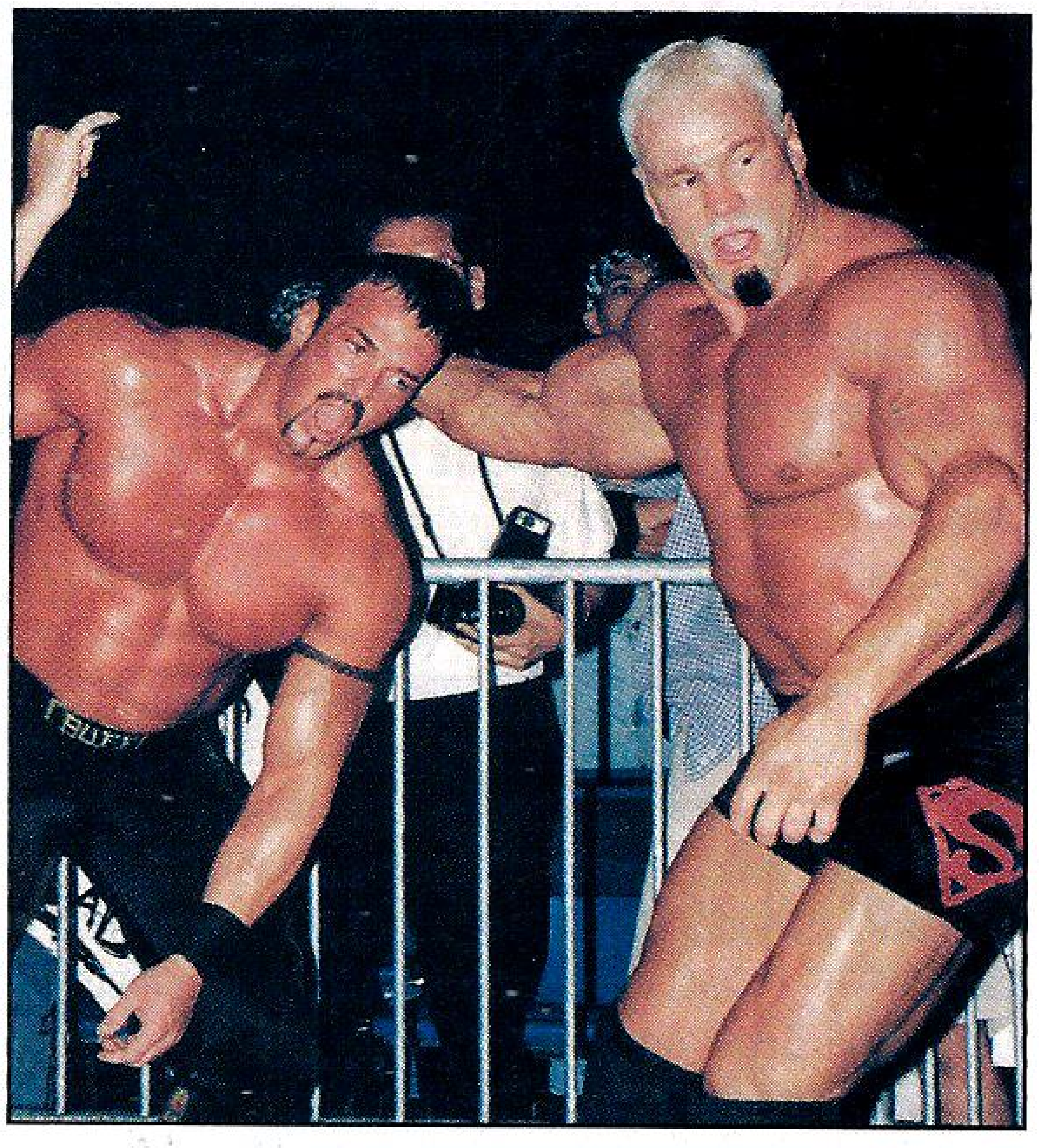


July 1995: Steiner cinches in a rear chinlock on 2 Cold Scorpio, who was just one of the many ECW regulars The Steiners battled during their brief stay in the "Land Of Extreme."



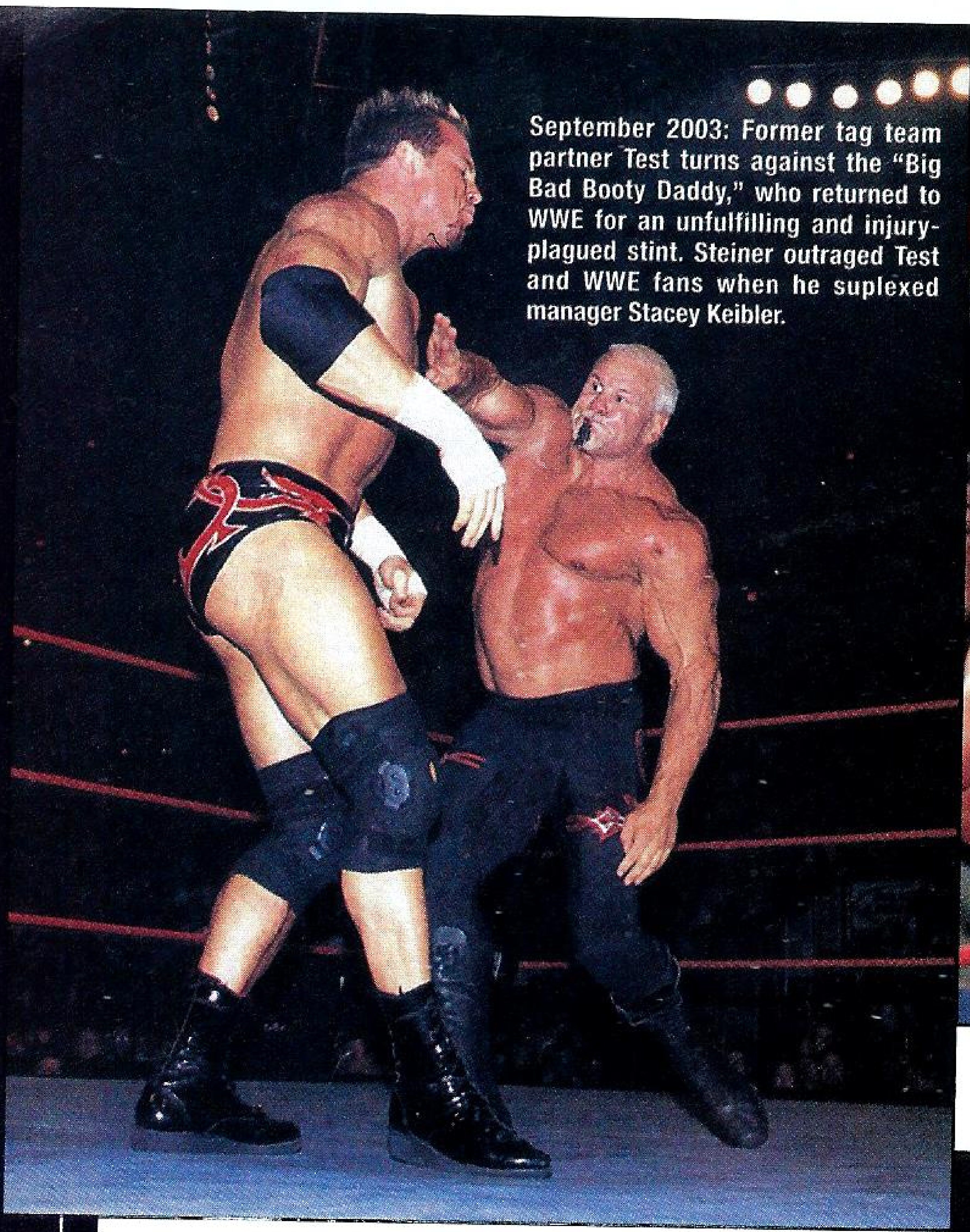
December 1997: Scott and Rick maintain the fight to keep NWO members such as Randy Savage from spreading their poison throughout WCW.

"farewell address" on a December episode of *Nitro* ... Revealed he was bluffing, and later in the same episode attacked Sid Vicious ... Steiner joined up once again with the NWO when the faction re-formed in 2000 ... Began having his "Freaks" (one of whom soon became his personal valet, Madijah) and adopted the nickname "Big Bad Booty Daddy" ... Later on, he joined the New Blood faction, feuding with the Millionaire's Club ... When that conflict went by the wayside, Steiner marched to the forefront of the Ric Flair-led Magnificent Seven faction ... Revived his old feud with Booker T in the late-fall ... Defeated Booker in a straight-jacket cage match, winning the match via the Steiner recliner ... The two continued to feud until WCW was bought out by Vince McMahon the following March ... Steiner lost the WCW World title to Booker T on the final episode of *Monday Nitro*, on March 26, 2001 ... Was not among those WCW stars whose contracts were bought out by the WWF when WCW was purchased ... Instead opted to compete for Australian promotion World Wrestling All-Stars ... Pinned Nathan Jones after striking him with the WWA championship belt, on the spring 2002 pay-per-view event, "The Eruption" ... Didn't defend the WWA title and eventually was stripped of the belt upon his defection to WWE in the fall ... Steiner

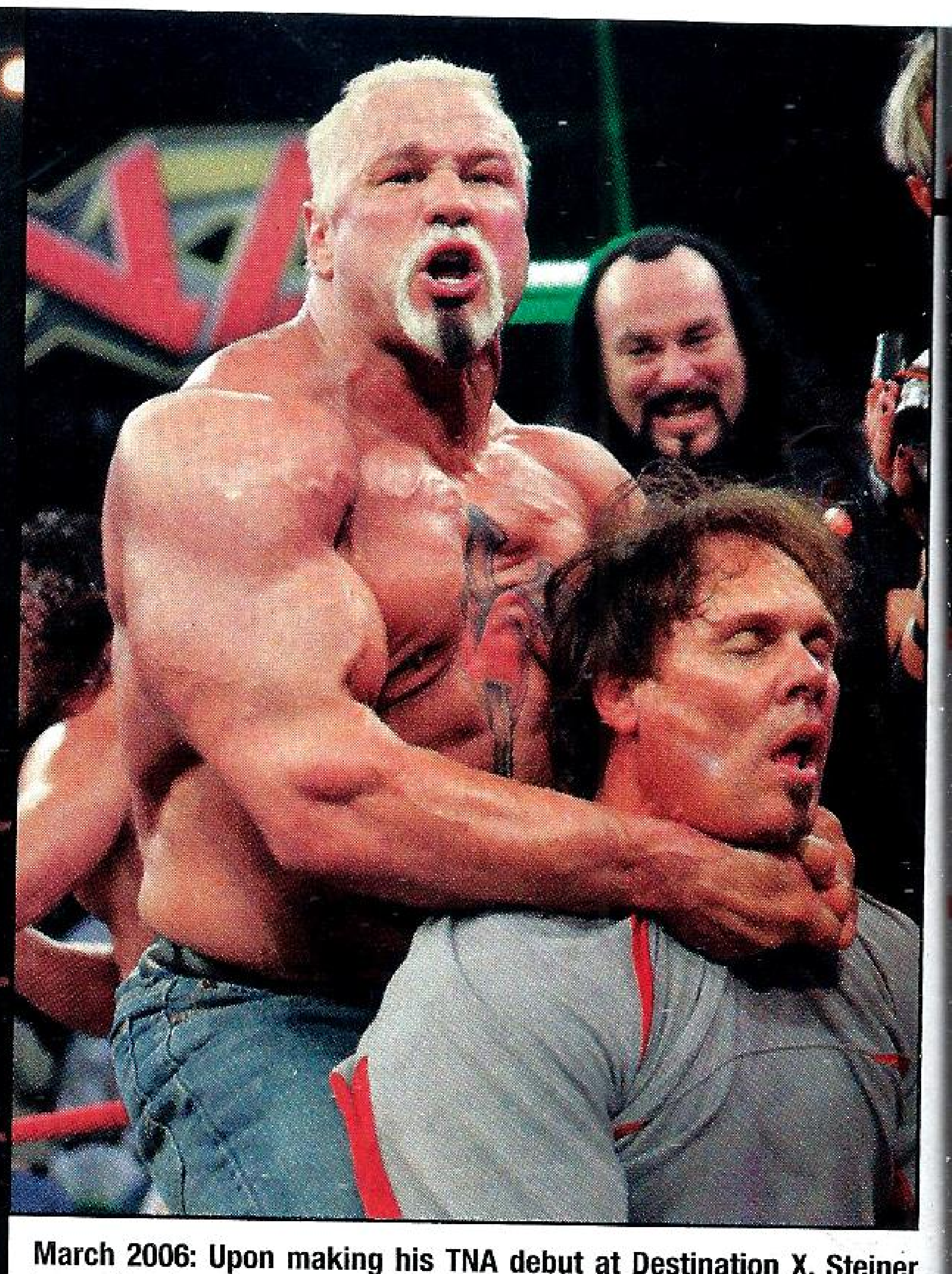


December 1998: Sporting bleached blond hair and an edgy new gimmick, "Big Poppa Pump" battles former NWO member Buff Bagwell to establish which wrestler has the more impressive physique.

made his return to WWE at the 2002 Survivor Series in Madison Square Garden ... After entertaining offers from both WWE brands, Steiner signed with the Raw brand and targeted its champion, Triple-H ... Defeated Triple-H by disqualification at the 2003 Royal Rumble ... Was pinned



September 2003: Former tag team partner Test turns against the "Big Bad Booty Daddy," who returned to WWE for an unfulfilling and injury-plagued stint. Steiner outraged Test and WWE fans when he suplexed manager Stacey Keibler.



March 2006: Upon making his TNA debut at Destination X, Steiner immediately attacks Steve Borden at the behest of Jeff Jarrett, who expects "Big Poppa Pump" to counter Sting's presence in TNA.

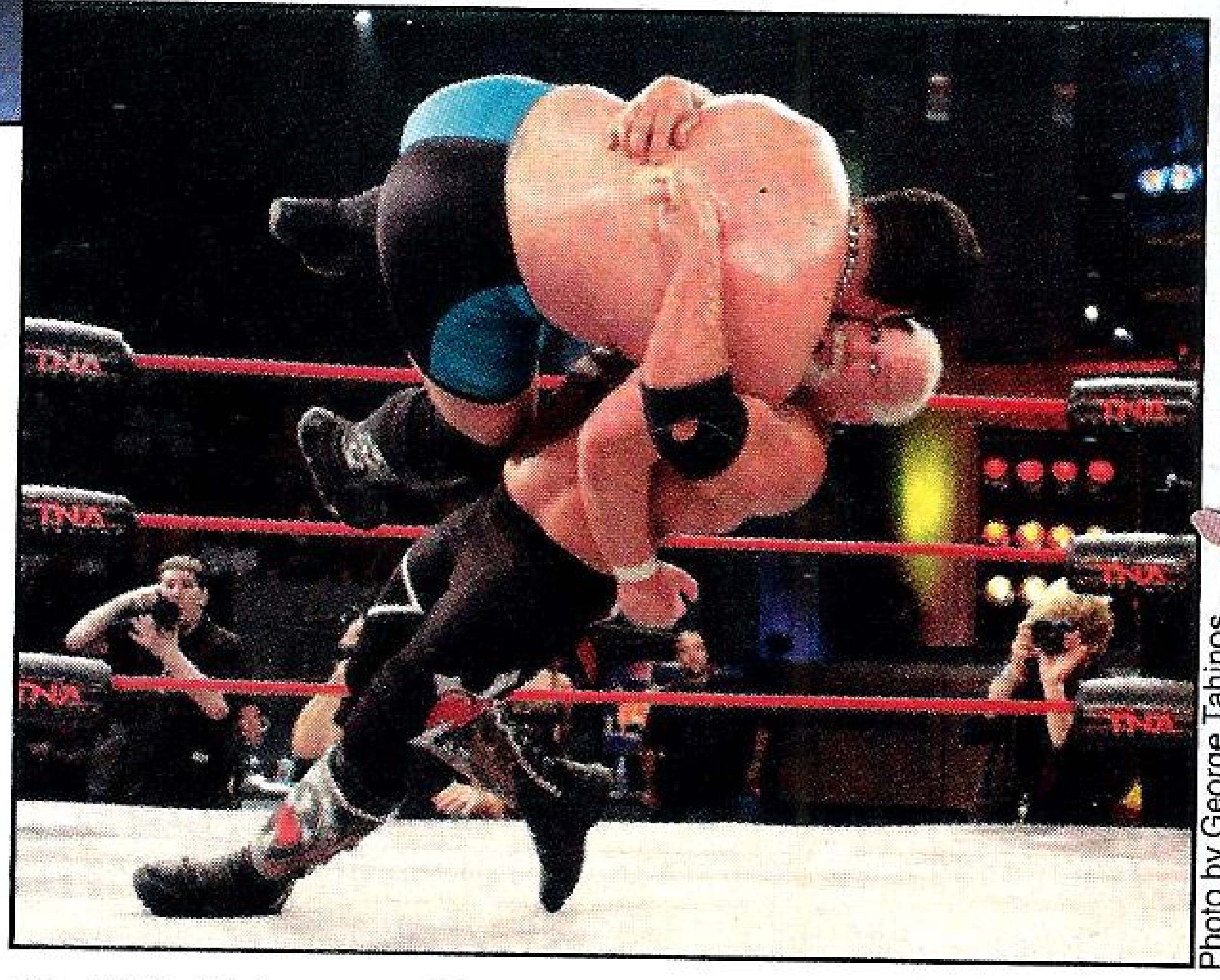


Photo by George Tahinos

May 2008: Steiner uses his superlative mat acumen against Samoa Joe in his bid for the TNA World title at Sacrifice. Despite Steiner's best efforts, Joe turned him and Kaz away.

by "The Game" in a no-holds-barred rematch at No Way Out, following the interference of Evolution ... Began teaming with Test, with Stacy Keibler managing the team ... Test turned against Steiner and then defeated him in a match, which contractually kept the team together ... Steiner later showed his callous side, suplexing Stacy Keibler on Raw ... Fans weren't happy, and the Test-Steiner alliance bore little fruit ... Suffered a serious foot injury, sidelining him for several months ... Eventually, in August of 2004, Steiner and WWE came to terms on his release from the company ... Underwent surgery, then took most of the next year off ... Competed at a few indy events in late-2005 before making his TNA debut in the spring ... Made his first TNA appearance at Destination X, costing Sting his match against Jeff Jarrett ... Teamed with Jarrett in several matches against Sting and various partners, but always seemed to come up short ... Left TNA for a brief period in the latter part of 2006, returning in January '07 ... Interfered in the NWA World title match at Against All Odds, costing Kurt Angle the bout against champion Chrisian Cage ... Pinned by Angle at Destination X ... Was heralded for pulling off his famous Frankensteiner maneuver in the 2007 Lethal Lockdown match ... Reunited with brother Rick and began feuding with Team 3D ... Scott was briefly sidelined with a serious throat injury, but returned in time to help Rick defeat Team 3D in a best-of-three tables match at Bound For Glory ... The brothers lost to A.J. Styles and Travis Tomko in a TNA World tag title match at Genesis ... Grabbed one of the briefcases suspended during the "Feast Or Fired" match at Turning Point ... Traded briefcases with fellow winner Petey Williams only to discover he'd acquired an X division title shot ... Defeated Williams at Against All Odds, with the help of new valet Rhaka Khan ... Was awarded both briefcases ... Took Williams on as a protégé, forcing him to undergo a bizarre set of hazing rituals ... Gave Petey back the X division title contract and announced that he would be challenging Samoa Joe for the TNA World title at Sacrifice ... Later on, Angle would be inserted into the match ... As of spring 2008, Scott Steiner had effectively made his way back into the main-event picture of the wrestling business, with his eyes firmly set on the TNA World title. □

[Q & A]

JESSE VENTURA

"Vince was the last hurrah for me"

JESSE "THE BODY" VENTURA is one of the most controversial figures in both professional wrestling and in American politics.

Ventura was a flamboyant wrestler, boasting one of the most impressive physiques of the 1970s and early-1980s. Inspired by the legendary "Superstar" Billy Graham, Ventura, a former Navy SEAL, adopted bright tie-dyed tights, hot pink feather boas, and dangling earrings. He was a tailor-made fit for the World Wrestling Federation, which Vince McMahon was pushing beyond traditional regional boundaries and attempting to build into a national empire.

Ventura had been a tag team champion in the American Wrestling Association along with Adrian Adonis. In 1981, the team moved on to McMahon's WWF. Jesse, with his tremendous speaking skills and unique look, was a perfect villainous foil for Hulk Hogan, who had assumed the mantle of World champion in 1984.

Ventura was poised for a series of World title matches against Hogan when blood clots were discovered in his lungs, an illness he blames on exposure to the chemical Agent Orange while serving in the military.

Ventura retired from wrestling and found a new career at the broadcast table, becoming one of the most successful color commentators in wrestling history. Usually paired with either McMahon or Gorilla Monsoon, Ventura "called it like he saw it," usually championing the heels and reminding his straight-laced announcing partners "it's only cheating if you get caught."

Ventura parlayed his notoriety from the announcing booth to the silver screen, appearing in the Arnold Schwarzenegger films ***Predator*** *and* ***The Running Man.*** *After a brief run in WCW, Ventura left the wrestling world and entered the unlikely world of politics, winning the office of mayor in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, in 1990.*

In 1998, Ventura achieved the seemingly impossible, and was elected governor of Minnesota as an independent candidate. Throughout the past decade, many of Ventura's political positions have remained controversial (supporting gay rights, advocating the use of medicinal marijuana, calling for legalized prostitution, opposing teachers' unions, and openly questioning the findings of the 9/11 Commission).

He continues to call things as he sees them, and has developed a reputation for questioning authority, being outspoken, and speaking his mind—even if his opinions aren't necessarily politically correct.

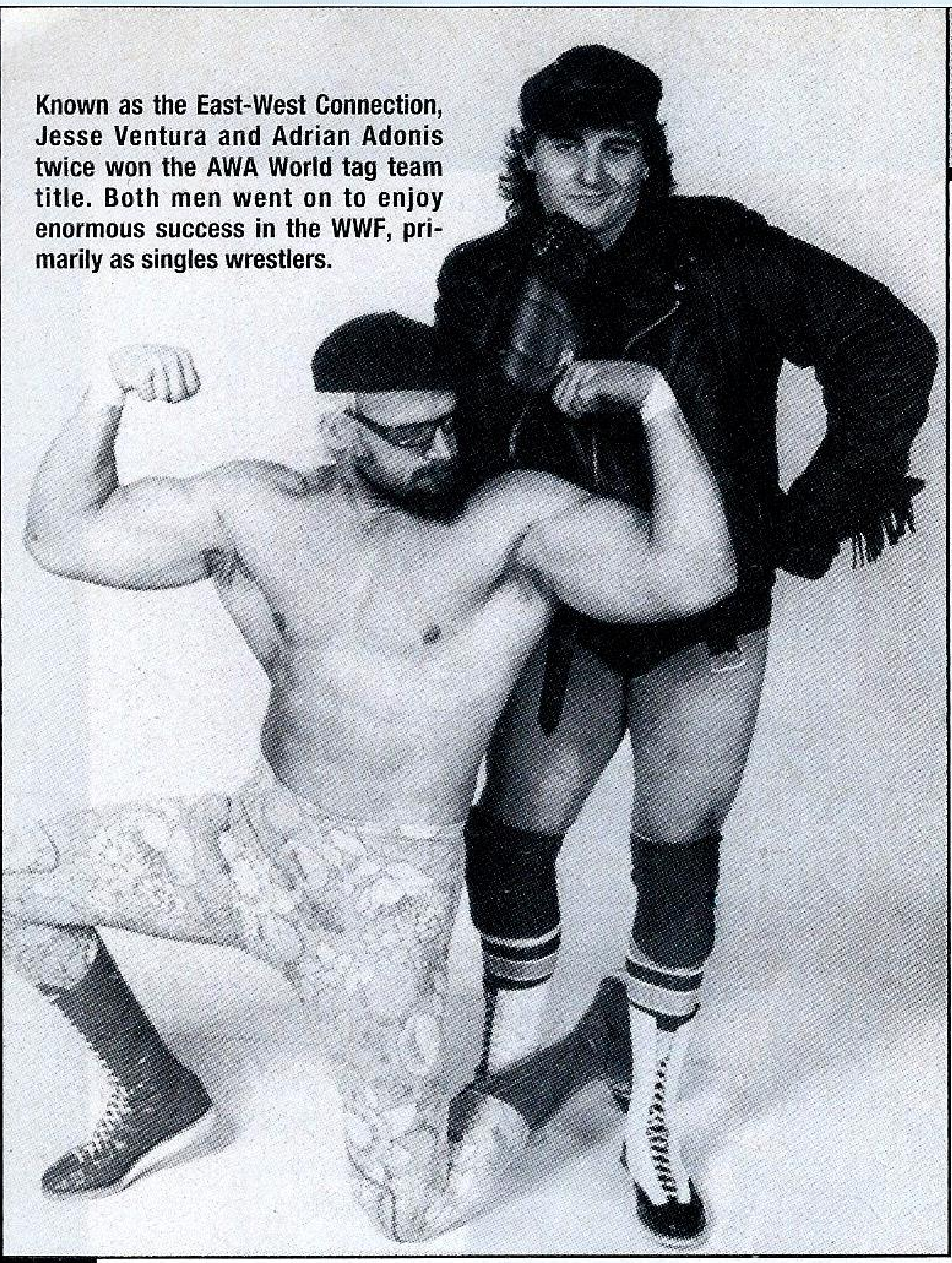
In April, Ventura released his third book, ***Don't Start The Revolution Without Me****. In this new book, Ventura talks about his experience as governor, his life after political office, and his opinions of the current political climate, all told with the characteristic Ventura swagger.*

Senior Writer Dan Murphy caught up with Ventura for this interview.

"I'm fascinated by Ventura's political beliefs, but I tried to keep this interview largely focused on his wrestling career," Murphy said. "As we started the interview, Jesse said he doesn't follow wrestling much anymore, tuning in a couple of times per year, so I asked more about his own career than thoughts on the business today. I would highly recommend his new book to anyone who would like to know more about Jesse's politics and his future political aspirations."

Q: Jesse, I'd like to start off with some wrestling questions, and then touch on some more political topics. Let's start with your in-ring career. As you explain in the new book, your wrestling career came to an end when you were diagnosed with blood clots in your lungs, just as you were starting a major program against Hulk Hogan in the WWF. Considering how big Hogan and the WWF were becoming at that point in the mid-1980s, and how lucrative a program against Hogan must have been, was it a particularly devastating blow for you?

A: Definitely, of course, but the main thing was to survive. Wrestling Hogan was secondary. The condition that I was in was critical for seven days, so it was more of a matter of survival. In hindsight, it certainly cost me a good deal of money because I was scheduled to go all the way around with Hogan in a series of matches that I'm sure would have been very lucrative.



Known as the East-West Connection, Jesse Ventura and Adrian Adonis twice won the AWA World tag team title. Both men went on to enjoy enormous success in the WWF, primarily as singles wrestlers.

Q: While your program against Hogan never got off the ground, you remained with the WWF as a color commentator and were there as Vince McMahon really took the company national and introduced the "Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection" with MTV and WrestleMania. What was that experience like, seeing wrestling bring in the younger fans, celebrities getting involved, and more glitzy production values?

A: Well, it was a roll of the dice for us wrestlers, because at the time Vince was changing the face of wrestling. There were 26 regionalized territories at the time, with regionalized TV that held the group together, called the NWA, which you're familiar with, I'm sure. And we were doing something that was unspeakable at that time. There was an agreement that the old guard had at the time that they would never cross borders. Vince was the new guard, and he was going to cross the old borders. For me, as a wrestler at the time, it was more of a last-ditch effort. I was going to quit anyway, so I just thought this would be the last big hurrah. I thought if I was part of it and it was successful, it would lead to bigger and better things, both for wrestling and for me as an individual. If it failed, we were all under the threat of being blackballed through the other 26 territories—or 25, whatever number—that we would never wrestle again. So it was kind of a do-or-die situation. If we succeeded, it would be a success beyond all belief. If we failed, it probably would have been the end of our wrestling careers.

Q: So you were already looking to end your in-ring career by the time you made it to the WWF?

A: Well, by the time I did the jump to Vince, yeah. Vince was the last hurrah for me. I was going to wrestle for him in this new expansion, the WWF—which is WWE today—and they had made progression across the country to make wrestling national. That was going to be my last hurrah, regardless of whether it succeeded or failed.

Q: Why is that? Why were you looking at getting out of wrestling at that point? You were still young and seemed like you had many more good years ahead of you.

A: By that time, I would have been approaching the 10-year mark. It takes a great toll on your body. I get wanderlust. I don't like to do anything for too long. Wrestling is the thing I did for the majority of my life, and that was only for 15 years. If you look at my career, I like to change jobs often. I like to try new and different things, new and different careers. So, at that point in time, with the 26 regional promotions, I was fed up with how wrestling worked. Vince was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Q: Around 1985 and 1986, you worked to unionize pro wrestling. Do you think a union could ever happen today, with WWE having a virtual monopoly on the business—or did that opportunity come and go in the 1980s?

A: It could have been. It could have worked then, but then, of course, the wrestlers were too cowardly to attempt it. When I attempted to unionize, it was right before WrestleMania II. The matches were set. I believe Hogan was wrestling [King Kong] Bundy, if I'm not mistaken.

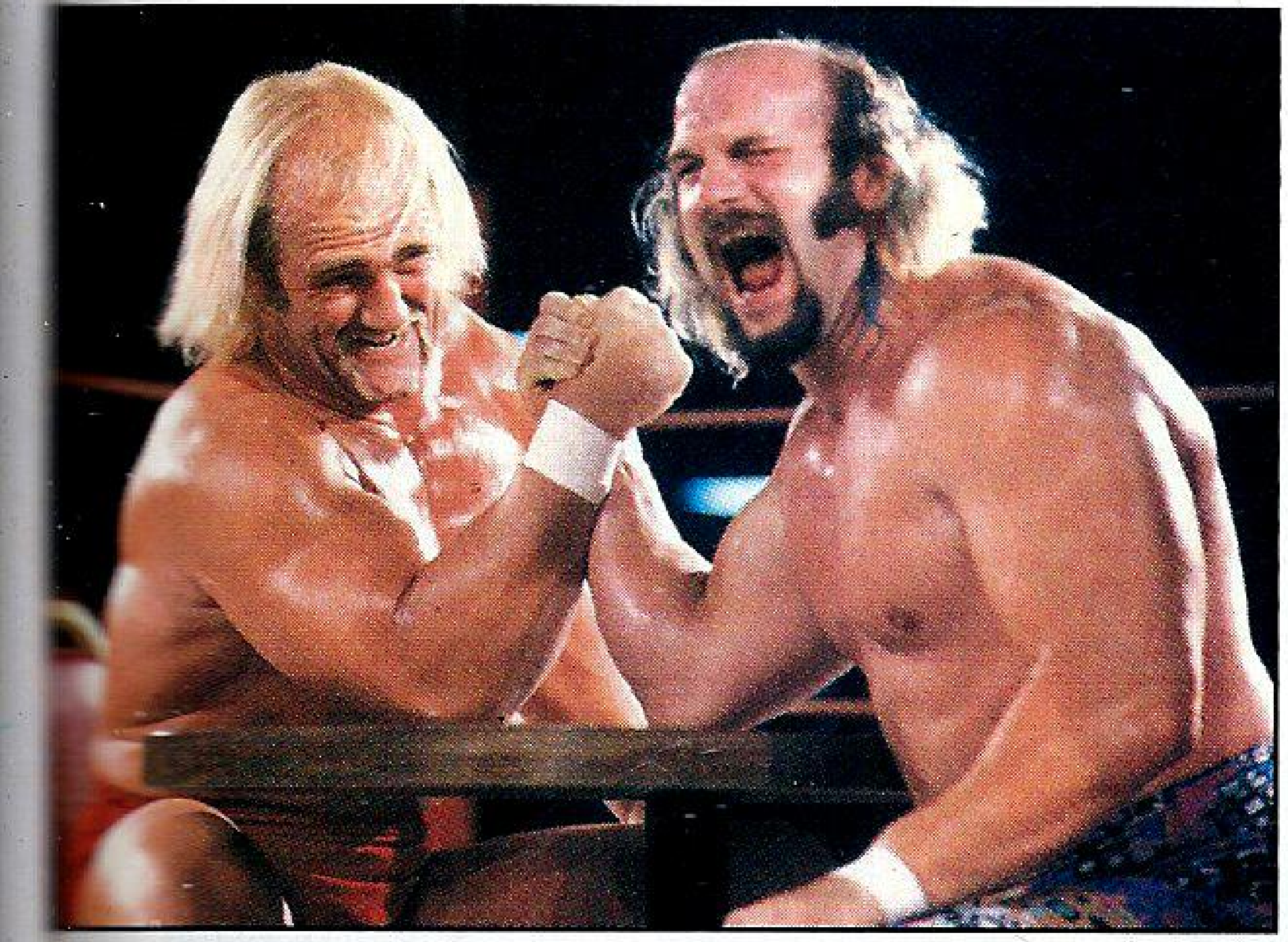
Q: That's right.

A: Everything was set. All the promos were out. I stood up in the dressing room and I told the boys, "Now is the time to unionize." We were still heavily at war with [the NWA promotions in] Charlotte and Atlanta at the time, and if we could have gotten them to go along with it and follow our example, we could have unionized wrestling right there. And the reason I brought it up, I was in a hotel in Las Vegas and Gene Upshaw of the NFL Players Association got on the elevator with me. He recognized me and we started talking, and he told me, "You boys in wrestling need to unionize." And I told him I know we do. The union talk was mostly for wrestling conditions. I mean, we had no health benefits; we had to pay them on our own. There's no retirement for pro wrestlers, you have to set that up for yourself.

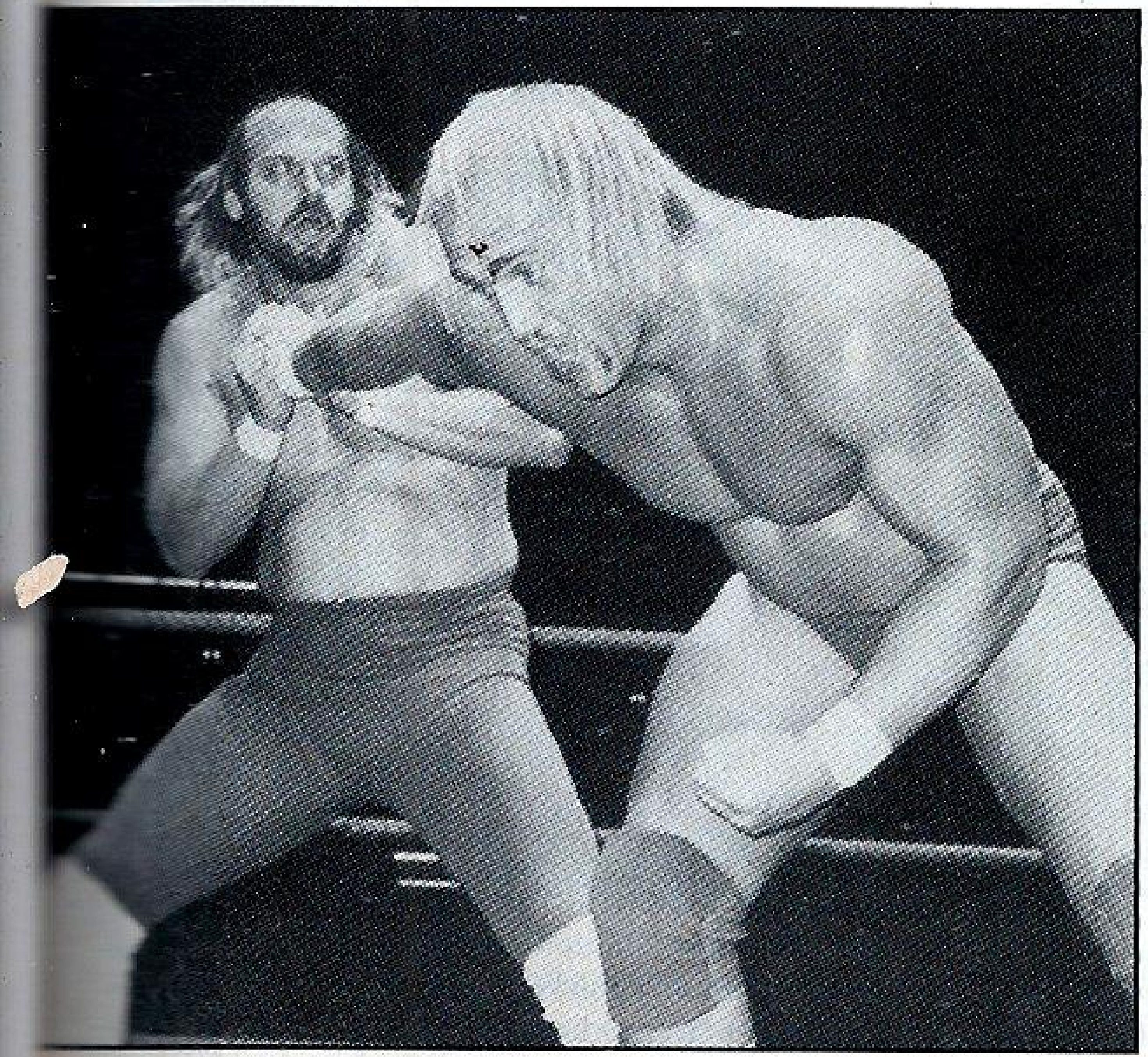
And let's face it, not all wrestlers are financial planners as a second occupation. I just felt very strongly at the time, I was paying $4,000 a year in health insurance for my family, and if we could have got this group in pro wrestling, it probably would have reduced that cost to $1,000 a year. So I got up in front of the wrestlers and the first thing they said was, "We need Hogan." I said no we don't. Hogan needs someone to wrestle: Bundy. As long as we had Bundy, we could do this.

> **"Wrestling is the thing I did for the majority of my life, and that was only for 15 years. If you look at my career, I like to change jobs often. I like to try new and different things, new and different careers."**

Well, I did my big speech and the next day when I got home, Vince called me at home and read me the riot act and threatened to fire me. I ended up quitting anyway because I was going off to film *Predator.* While doing *Predator*, I became a member of the Screen Actors Guild, which is a terrific union. So when I did return to Vince and we began renegotiating, I was the first person who made Vince deal with an agent. Through my agent, I let Vince know that I no longer cared about unionizing wrestling. If the wrestlers didn't have the guts to do it for themselves, I wasn't going to put myself out there for them, because I now had my union with the Screen Actors Guild. I've been a member now since 1986. I now get retirement from the SAG, I get my healthcare benefits from the SAG, and it's been that way since 1986. I got my union, but, unfortunately, the majority of the wrestlers didn't get theirs. But that's their problem now. I tried to stand up for it. Of course, it came out that Hogan was the one who ratted on me. He denies it, but I found out during the federal deposition when I took Vince to court, because we questioned him to find out what had happened. He said unequivocally that Hogan had told him, and Vince also admitted it on *Larry King Live* when Larry brought it up. King said Jesse Ventura tried to unionize wrestling and said it was Hulk Hogan who undermined him, and Vince backed it up again. No matter how many times Hogan denies it, I believe he did because he was being taken care of better than the rest of us. I found out in my court case that at one of the WrestleManias, he made more money than all of the rest of us did combined.



Ventura and Hulk Hogan arm-wrestled and competed against each other in the AWA (above), then resumed the battle in the WWF (below). Ventura was set to start a long program in pursuit of Hogan's WWF World title, but was forced to retire after blood clots were found in his lungs.

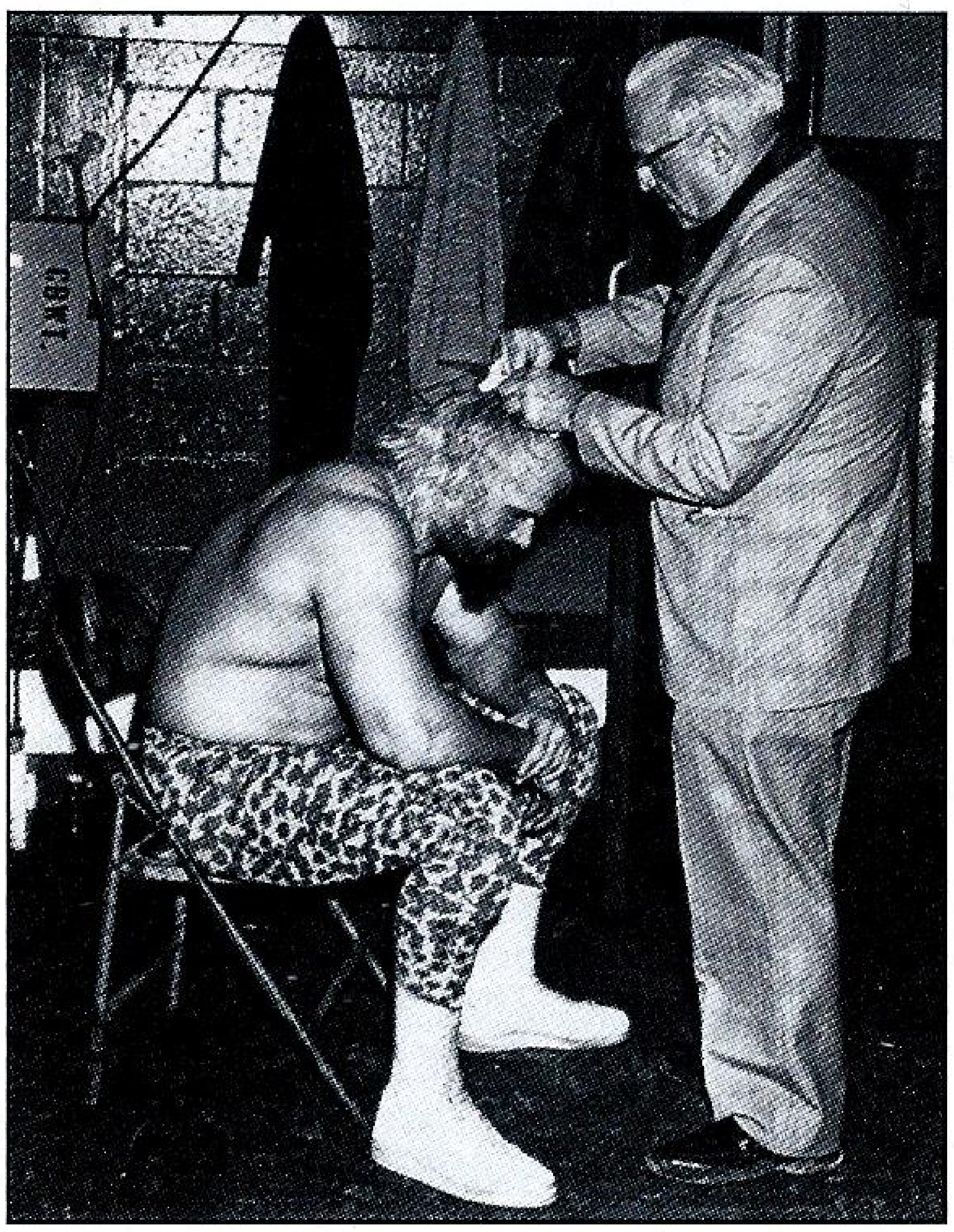


Q: Would that have been WrestleMania III?

A: It could have been. I don't recall which one, but I know it came out in my federal court case *(Editor's note: Ventura sued Titan Sports, the parent company of the WWF, in 1991 for royalties from videotape sales, and was awarded $801,333 from a federal jury.)* You could look up the records if you wanted to. There was a breakdown of the entire payoff for that WrestleMania, and Hogan got more than everyone else combined.

Q: How did you feel when you started the fight and no one else in the locker room picked up the union mantle? Were you disappointed that no one had followed your lead?

A: I felt they were being dumb wrestlers, that they were being stupid, and being very shortsighted. In the long run, it would have helped all of us, gotten us better working conditions, and given more power



A doctor dresses Ventura's wounds after a tough AWA match. Citing the physical toll of competition, Jesse was actually about to quit the business before joining Vince McMahon in the WWF.

to the boys. But on second thought, I was going off to do *Predator.* I had my Screen Actors Guild card. I had my union, so why should I stand up and take a beating and get fired for it?

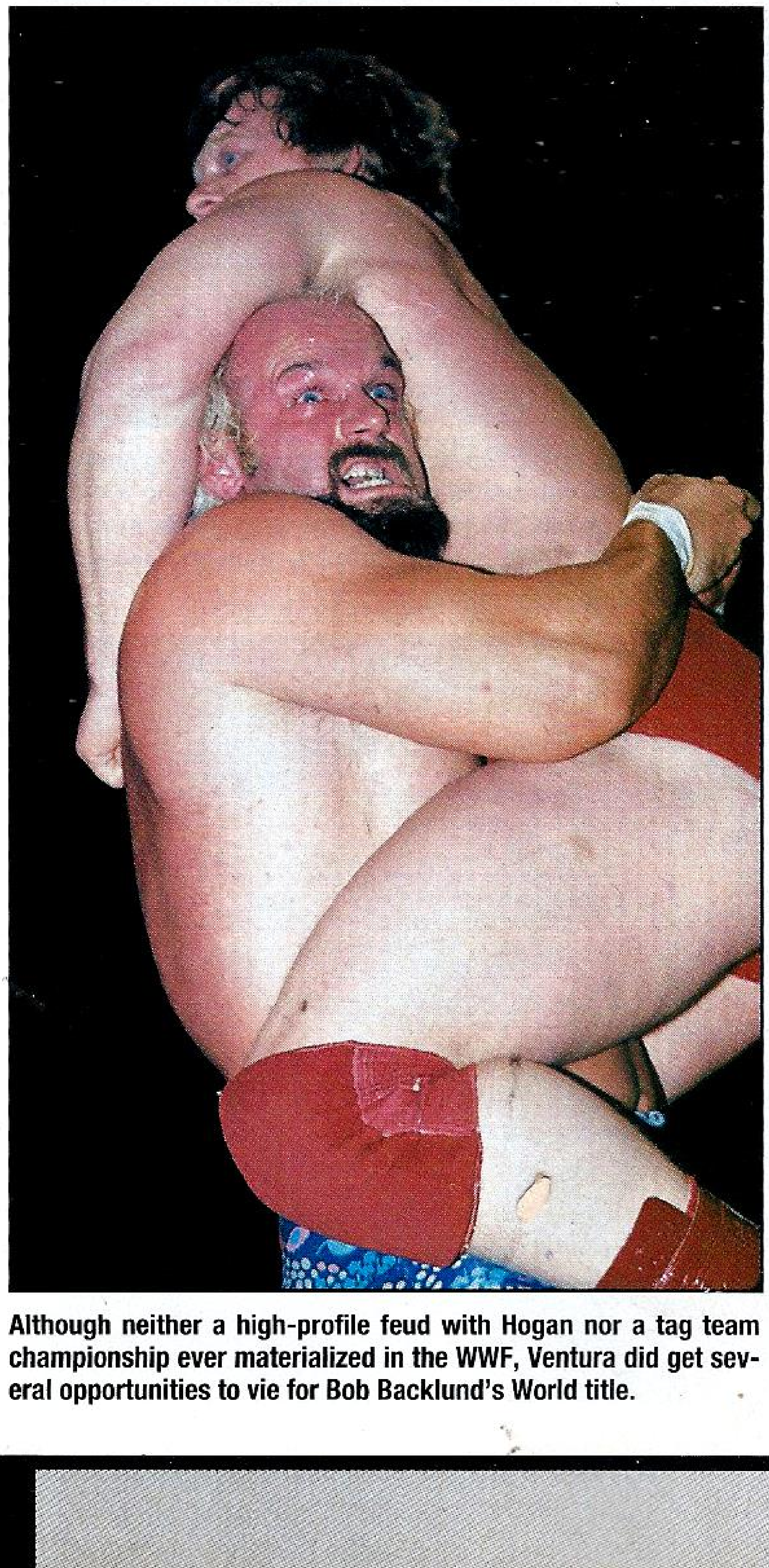
Q: In your new book, you look ahead to a fictional Jesse Ventura presidential run. In that chapter, you announce your candidacy at WrestleMania, in the ring with Vince. Floyd Mayweather took part at WrestleMania this year, and he was really crucified by the mainstream press for sullying his image and participating in something they called "lowbrow." Considering you wrote about kicking off your presidential campaign at WrestleMania, what do you think about the criticism celebrities receive when they become associated with wrestling?

A: First of all, Vince lost his courage. I took him that angle last June and he never returned the call to me. I wrote the whole thing out to him last June. I said, "If you want to go big time, I have an angle, an opportunity for us to do it." My angle was we would bring it forward that WWE didn't like any of the candidates and was going to form its own political party, and, naturally, Vince McMahon would be the choice for President. The two months before 'Mania, I was going to come on the scene and challenge Vince because Vince is corporate America personified. *I've* been a mayor, *I've* been a governor, *and I* should be the candidate. We set up the angle for WrestleMania, I prevail, and at that point I become a legitimate candidate for the presidency. In the meantime, all of Vince's people would be out in all 50 states gaining ballot access.

Q: So you planned on running for President this year and kicking it off at WrestleMania 24? That would have been an incredible angle.

A: It would have been very incredible. What I wrote was that building to 'Mania, everyone would think it was a hoax because it was pro wrestling. Then at 'Mania, I would announce that this is not a hoax; from this point on, it's real. Apparently, Vince wouldn't do it. I traveled all the way out to Connecticut on my money, wrote this out to him, returned home, and he never even gave me a phone call. I find that very disturbing because I feel I at least deserve a callback. He could have declined doing it, but for him to not even return the phone call was very disrespectful.

Q: So since the presidential run didn't take place this year, what are your future political plans? Are you considering running for President in



Although neither a high-profile feud with Hogan nor a tag team championship ever materialized in the WWF, Ventura did get several opportunities to vie for Bob Backlund's World title.

2012? There have also been rumors that you might challenge either Norm Coleman or Al Franken for a Senate seat in Minnesota. Do you have your political plans all laid out right now?

A: No, not really. I look at running for office as a way to make a point. I don't do these things just to win the office. I'm a great believer that we should offer a new option on all ballots, whether they are local, state, or federal. That is, we should be offered a category of "None Of The Above." Now everyone chuckles at that when they hear it, but what it is in reality is a vote of no confidence in your government. It means, "I'm here, I'm participating, I'm voting, but the candidates you have offered give me no confidence in government, so I'm voting "None Of The Above."

I believe in certain local, statewide, and federal elections that "None Of The Above" could actually win. If I run for Senate in Minnesota, I'm going to put my name down and pay the filing fees and Jesse Ventura will become the option "None of the Above." And if I win, I will do the job. If I do this, I feel the public needs an option, and the two parties need their eyes opened up to the fact that they are destroying our country.

Q: I had planned to ask you about voter apathy and what you would recommend to an individual who wants to vote, but doesn't feel either candidate is the best choice for the office. I guess the "None Of The Above" option would correct that.

A: Give them that option. Look at it this way: Right now our government, controlled by the Democrats and Republicans, have us $9-trillion in debt. Imagine if Vince McMahon ran WWE in that manner. He would be out of business and put in prison by the stockholders, wouldn't he? We can't do that to these people, can we? They're running us into debt, they're running us into ruin, and we call them honorable and put them up on pedestals. They ought to be in jail, and if they were in the private sector, they would be. Enron, Worldcom ring a bell?

> "Through my agent, I let Vince know that I no longer cared about unionizing wrestling. If the wrestlers didn't have the guts to do it for themselves, I wasn't going to put myself out there for them."

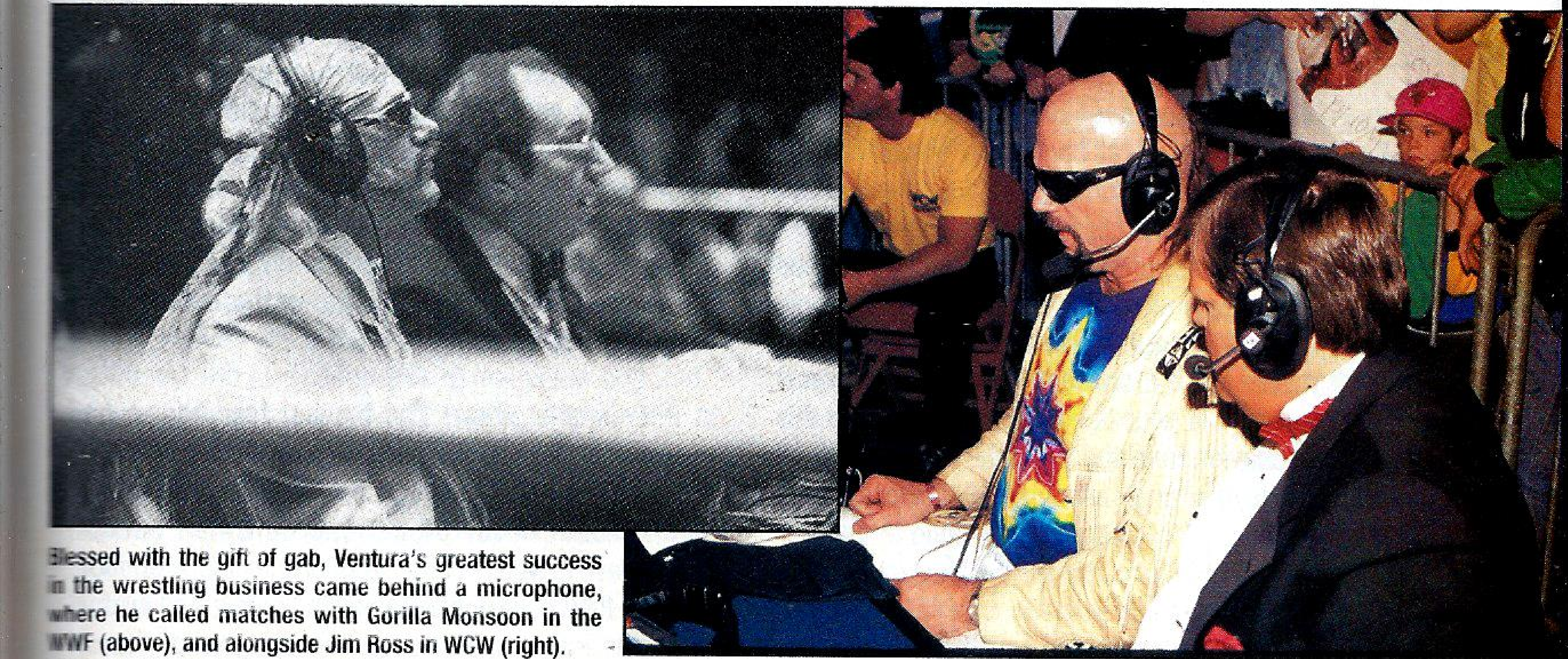
Q: Absolutely. I'm in Buffalo, and we were deeply affected by the Adelphia Communications scandal here.

A: There you go. It's indefensible. If I were to run for President right now, I would make the deficit top priority. You'll notice that none of the three candidates even bring it up.

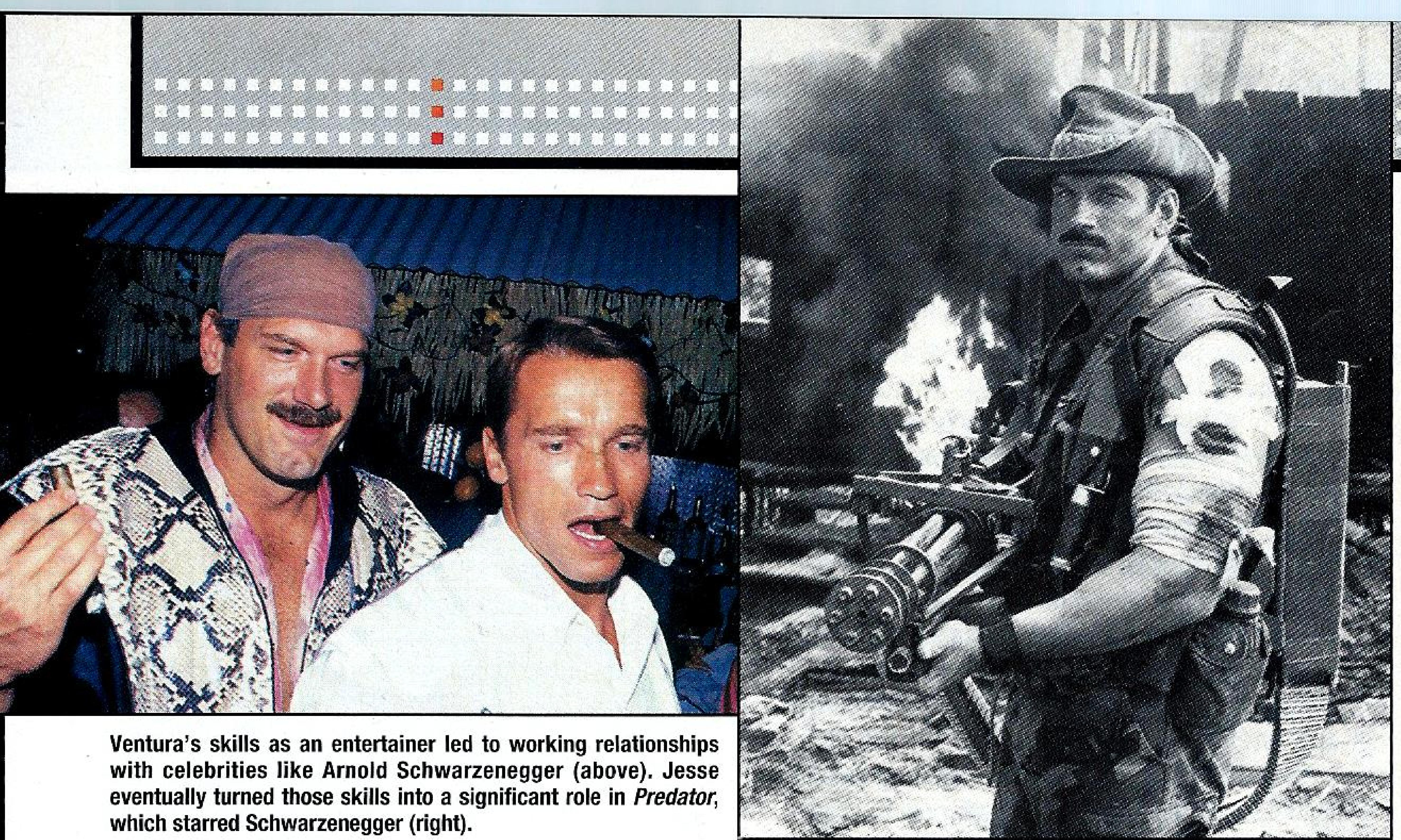
Q: But the deficit is deeply tied to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Without having a timeframe for ending those wars, it's difficult to keep the budget in check since you don't know what the limit for the spending will have to be.

A: Good point. The thing I would like to say is let's cut out foreign aid and turn it into domestic aid. How can we be lending other countries money when we're $9-trillion in debt? It makes no sense. If you run your home budget like that, people would say you were crazy. It would be like maxing out your credit cards, your house is being repossessed, yet you're going to loan somebody some money.

Q: Did you see the taped appearances of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain that aired recently on Raw?



Blessed with the gift of gab, Ventura's greatest success in the wrestling business came behind a microphone, where he called matches with Gorilla Monsoon in the WWF (above), and alongside Jim Ross in WCW (right).



Ventura's skills as an entertainer led to working relationships with celebrities like Arnold Schwarzenegger (above). Jesse eventually turned those skills into a significant role in *Predator*, which starred Schwarzenegger (right).

A: No, I did not. I heard a little about them. That shows Vince sold out to the status quo. We could have championed a third-party movement. I laid it all out for him to be able to do it. Instead, he went right with the status quo. In other words, they got time on his show, but I couldn't get in.

Q: I'd like to change gears a bit. A year ago, Chris Benoit killed his wife and son before killing himself. What was your immediate reaction upon hearing about Benoit? You were around the business. You have known wrestlers who abused drugs. Was the news about Benoit something that took you completely by surprise, or was there a sense that it was only a matter of time before something like this—as awful as this was—took place?

A: A tragic thing like that … no one expects anyone to behave in that manner. And when someone does, it shocks everyone because it's not normal behavior. I truly believe, and I'm no expert, but I don't think it was steroids, which they tried to push it on to. I think it was more about the concussions. Chris Nowinski wrote a great book on it (*Head Games: Football's Concussion Crisis*), and he's been chastised and blackballed because of it. These concussions athletes are suffering are much more serious than what people are giving them credit for. People always kind of laugh, "Oh, a concussion." They don't realize that's a bruise to your brain, the most important part of your body. I think Benoit had this erratic behavior from the multiple concussions he received in the ring, as much or more so than steroid use.

Q: Do you think the wrestling industry is complicit in creating the circumstance where those concussions aren't diagnosed?

A: All sports are that way. It isn't just wrestling. Football players are that way. Read Chris' book, it's phenomenal. He's a former football player. He gives examples of football players in their early-40s who have the brains of 80-year-olds. And there's scientific evidence that shows it. The NFL is going to get creamed on this one eventually, unless it can somehow manage to put [Chris] down. It's not just one or two cases; it's multiple cases, concussions on top of concussions. And players being treated in all sports, just like in wrestling, as pieces of meat.

Q: You were elected governor as an independent. What are your feelings about what is essentially a two-party system?

A: I don't put any faith in the two parties. I think they're both elitist parties. The Hillary-Obama race was coming down to these so-called superdelegates. What the hell is a superdelegate if it's not elitism? Why should one person's vote count more than another's? It makes no sense, but it shows the attitude of the elitist two-party system. I wouldn't vote for either Hillary or Obama, and I won't vote for John McCain, either. Until we get this lemming mentality out of our heads and start voting for independent candidates rather than Democrats and Republicans, we're headed down the road to ruin. Did you watch the current HBO special *John Adams?*

Q: I did. That was a great series.

A: Phenomenal show! The biggest fear Adams had was that our country and our government would be taken over by the political parties. They all maintain we would never be conquered by an outside nation—it would come from within. Sure enough, what they're saying is happening today. And we had better wake up to it and take our country back.

That's the reason for the book. There's a revolution coming. And a revolution doesn't have to be violent. A revolution can happen at the ballot box.

Q: So how does this revolution begin? If the candidates being put forth are part of the two-party system, how does the voter at the grassroots level affect a revolution from the status quo? Can that really be achieved?

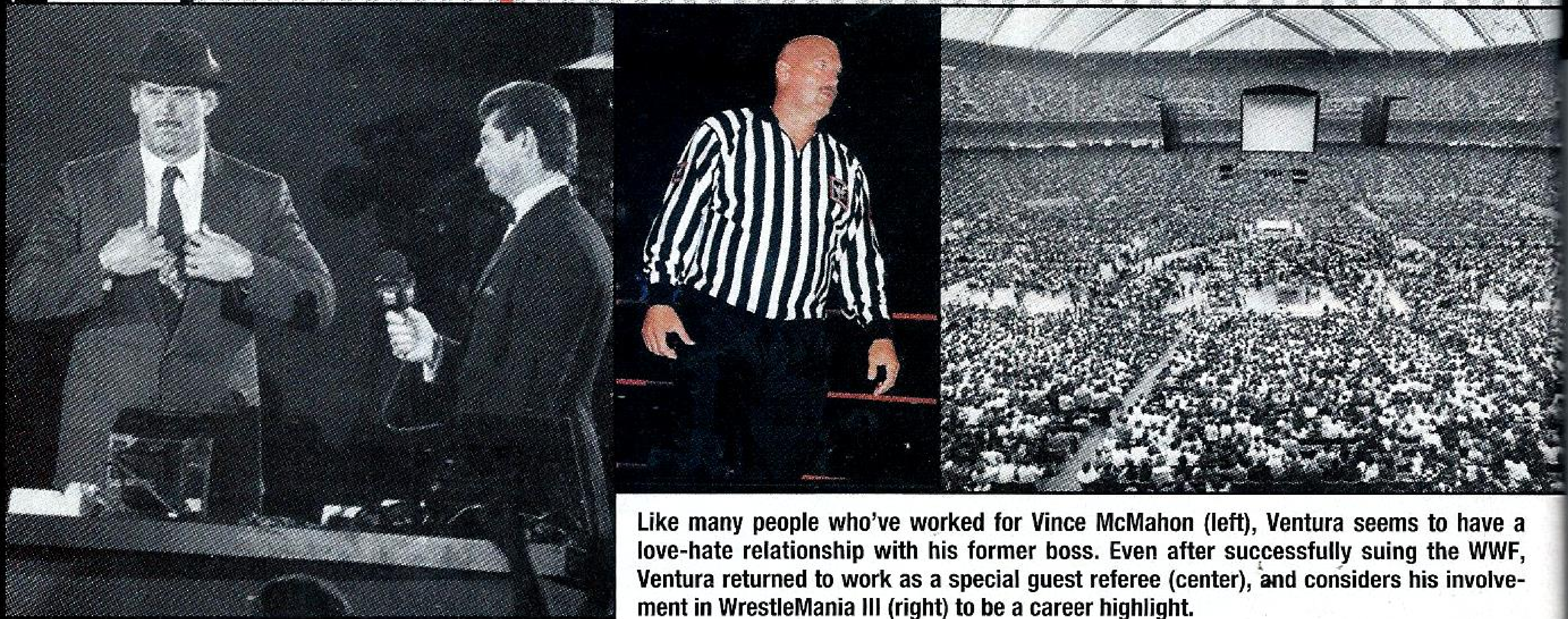
A: Sure, I think it can be. I mean, I won governor and nobody gave me a chance. When I announced in January 1998 that I was a candidate, the media made fun of me. They laughed. They said, "A former pro wrestler? How can you possibly win?" The key is we've got to take our debates back. Our debates for the presidency are now controlled. They used to be, until 1992, run by the League of Women Voters. Well, Ross Perot scared them so badly, Democrats and Republicans took the debates away from the League of Women Voters and formed another bureaucratic layer called the Federal Debate Commission, which is nothing but a rubber stamp for those two parties. Case in point, Perot wasn't allowed to debate because Bill Clinton and Bob Dole cut a deal. That's why Perot was eliminated. We have to take back our government, and you do it at the ballot box. Stop voting for Democrats and Republicans. Vote for anybody else. Remember, it's not a horserace. Don't go in there are try to pick a winner. Go in there and vote for the person who you think would make the best President.

Q: The most successful third-party candidates, such as you, have been extremely controversial people. As a third-party candidate, do you have to be so outspoken and controversial that you run the risk of being perceived or portrayed as a fringe or novelty candidate?

A: It isn't necessarily that we are, but we have to be that way, otherwise you won't get any attention paid to you. We're lemmings now, we're into this lemming mentality. Think of it this way for a moment, maybe this will bring it into perspective: When Abraham Lincoln ran 150 years ago, there were three other candidates. Now, how much has our population grown in the past 150 years? Yet now we're given only two choices? We have a population that has grown 10 times larger and yet we're given one fewer choice. I'll always remember when I did *Larry King Live* a few years ago and I was on with Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming. At the time, he was heading the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. The topic was the two-party system, and Senator Simpson went on and on, explaining how great the two-party system has served us. I sat there quietly. Finally, Larry King said to me, "Governor, how do you feel about the two-party system?" And I said, "Larry, I think it's phenomenal. It gives us one more choice than communist Russia." Well, what could Simpson reply to that? Nothing. Because it's true. Let me put it in a simple perspective that hopefully wrestling fans can understand: It's like walking into the grocery store and going to the soft drink aisle, and your only two choices are Coke and Pepsi. They're both colas, one is slightly sweeter than the other depending on your taste buds. But there's no Mountain Dew, there's no root beer, there's no orange, there's no 7-Up.

> "If an independent truly were to challenge for the presidency of the United States, and if it looked like he might win, I believe that person would be assassinated—if not physically, then in some other manner."

Borrowing heavily from the flamboyant "Superstar" Billy Graham (top left), Ventura (above right) perfected an over-the-top character whose influence can be seen in many of today's superstars such as Scott Steiner (above left).



Like many people who've worked for Vince McMahon (left), Ventura seems to have a love-hate relationship with his former boss. Even after successfully suing the WWF, Ventura returned to work as a special guest referee (center), and considers his involvement in WrestleMania III (right) to be a career highlight.

Q: The only difference is one cola has a red label and one has a blue label.

A: Exactly! But those are your choices. Now, down in Cuba, Fidel Castro runs for president. He runs unopposed, so he wins. Wow, we give you one more choice. That isn't very much to choose from.

Q: Speaking of Castro, the fictitious presidential campaign you outline ends when you are shot by an assassin who is angered by your stand of easing economic sanctions against Cuba.

A: First let me explain, I used myself as an example only so I don't get in any trouble. Robert Kennedy Jr. gave me permission to use him in the manner I did (as Jesse's third-party running mate). I used myself hypothetically. I feel that strongly that if an independent truly were to challenge for the presidency of the United States, and if it looked like he might win, I believe that person would be assassinated—if not physically, then in some other manner.

Q: So the fact that you named your "assassin" Raul Santana, that wasn't a member of Tito Santana's family trying to get revenge on you for all those years you called him "Chico" on commentary?

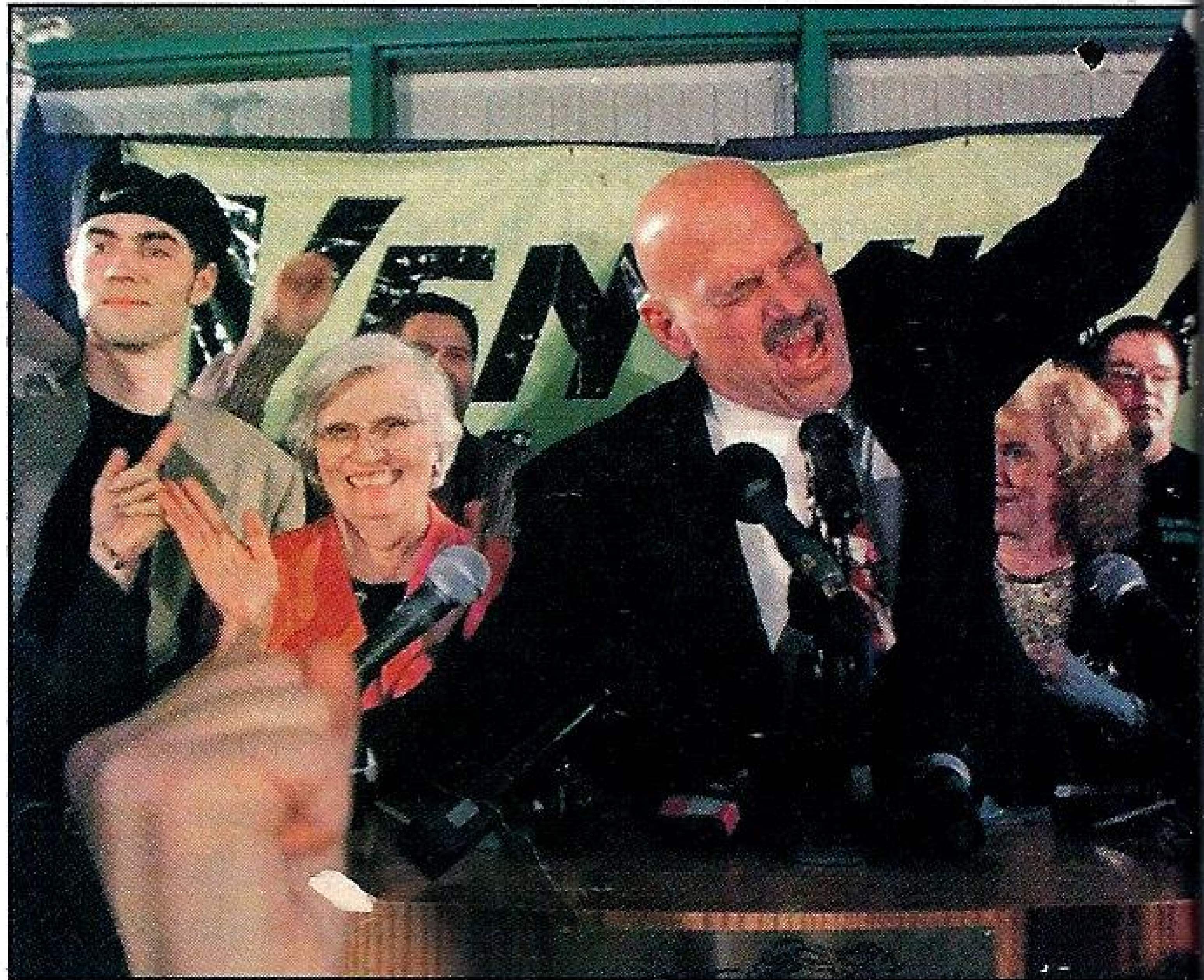
A: No, none whatsoever. In fact, that name came from Dick Russell, my co-writer, so I had no bearing on that at all (*laughs*).

Q: You mentioned that you don't follow wrestling much anymore. Are you familiar with TNA Wrestling out of Florida?

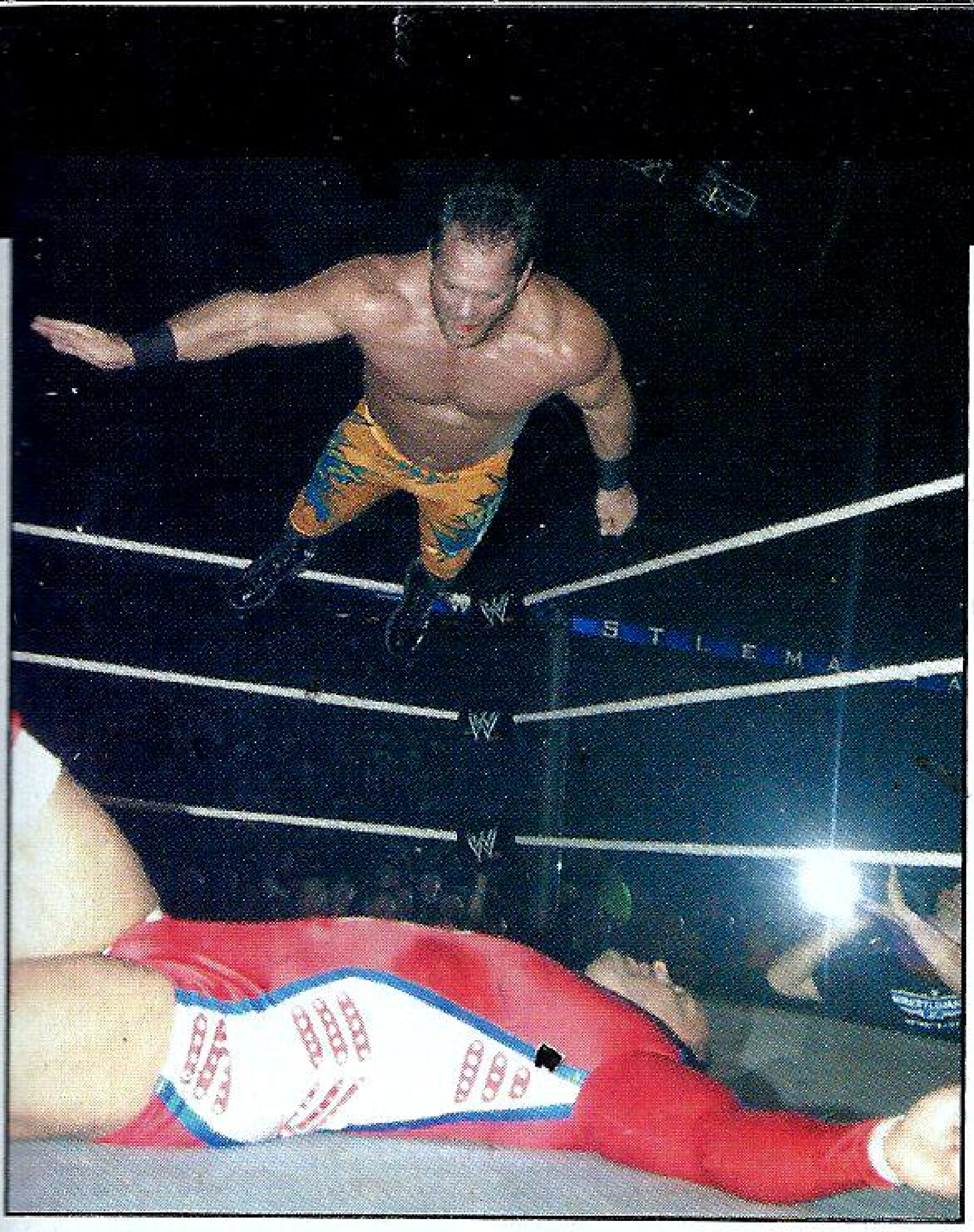
A: Yeah.

Q: They are trying to build themselves up into being competition for WWE on the national stage. What advice would you give to a company like TNA that is trying to challenge McMahon?

A: I would tell them not to watch McMahon, but to do their own thing. Take care of their own backyard, do the things that they do well and build from within. Like when Vince was taking over the country. The AWA and Verne Gagne, the biggest mistake they made was going to New York. Why didn't they just take care of their own backyard? You see, you've got people waging war who don't know how to do it. In a war, you always protect your own first. You never venture out into the enemy's territory. You make sure your own backyard is secure. That's the mistake Verne Gagne made. If he was just to have stayed within himself and kept his AWA like he had it, he might have survived. Instead, he tried to expand and he wasn't capable of it. He tried to go to New York, and it ended up draining all of his finances. He pushed himself too thin and ended up going bankrupt. In the case of this new group, if they want to challenge Vince, they need to build their own following, stay within themselves, and don't sit and watch what Vince does and try to emulate that. Create for yourself with your own ideas. Does that sound logical?



November 1998: The former Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, mayor reacts to news that he's just become the state's governor. As of press time, Ventura is unsure if a senatorial or presidential run is in his political future.



Ventura feels concussions were more to blame for Chris Benoit's mental and emotional collapse than drug abuse.

Q: It certainly does, and it's something some members of our editorial staff have discussed in that TNA seems to have difficulty building up its own top stars and has grown somewhat reliant on former WWE or WCW wrestlers on top.

A: They'll need to create their own talent. It's okay to take some of Vince's talent because Vince will discard it prematurely to where these are still talented guys with quite a following, but they should just build up from there and create their own image and their own stuff instead of worrying about what Vince is doing. That's what my advice would be.

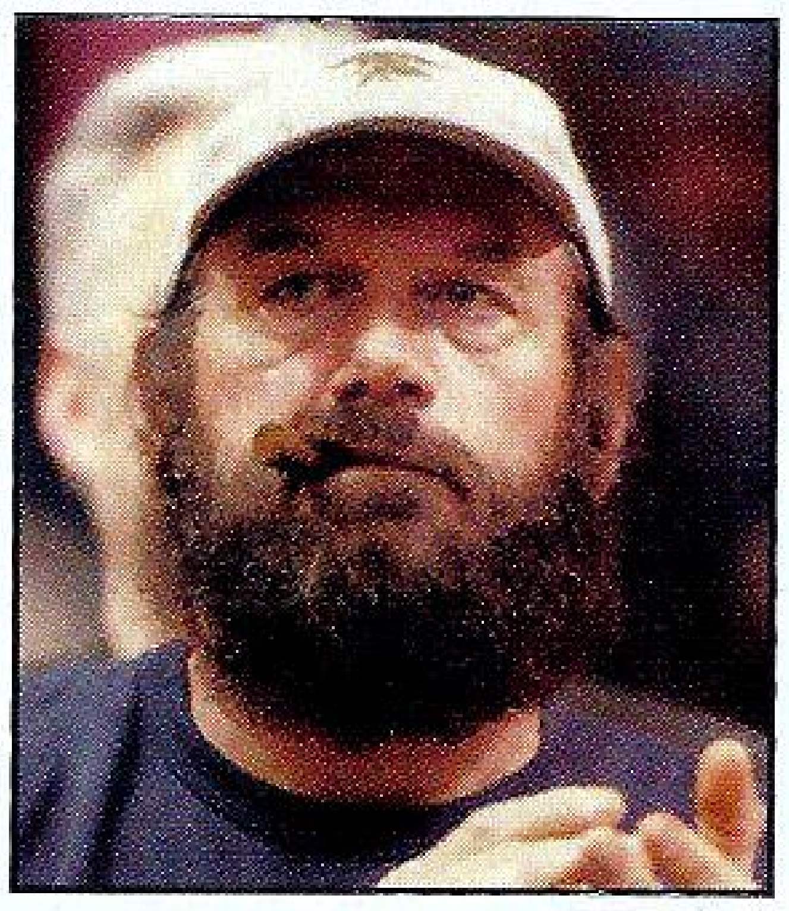
Q: Bruno Sammartino is one of the very few former WWF headliners who walked away from the company and never reconciled with Vince McMahon. WWE has made several overtures to Bruno to induct him into the Hall of Fame and to rebuild that relationship. As a member of the WWE Hall of Fame, do you feel Bruno is being stubborn or do you admire him for taking what he feels is a moral stand by not doing business with WWE?

A: That's Bruno's call. I think that Bruno, in a way, should accept being put in the Hall of Fame because Bruno certainly deserves it. I think on behalf of his fans he should do it. But then again, that's Bruno's call. If Bruno feels comfortable and feels he has to rebel and feels he should stand up to Vince, then he should do that. I mean, my God, they inducted Verne Gagne and Verne never even wrestled in the WWF. Bruno was a household name there for 25 years or longer. As much as his bitterness toward McMahon … I think in some ways, he should probably overlook it and look to his fans. But then again, maybe he thinks he's standing up for his fans by doing what he's doing. Again, that's Bruno's call. I would never question the reasons why Bruno does it; that's his business.

> "[If TNA wants] to challenge Vince, they need to build their own following, stay within themselves, and don't sit and watch what Vince does and try to emulate that."

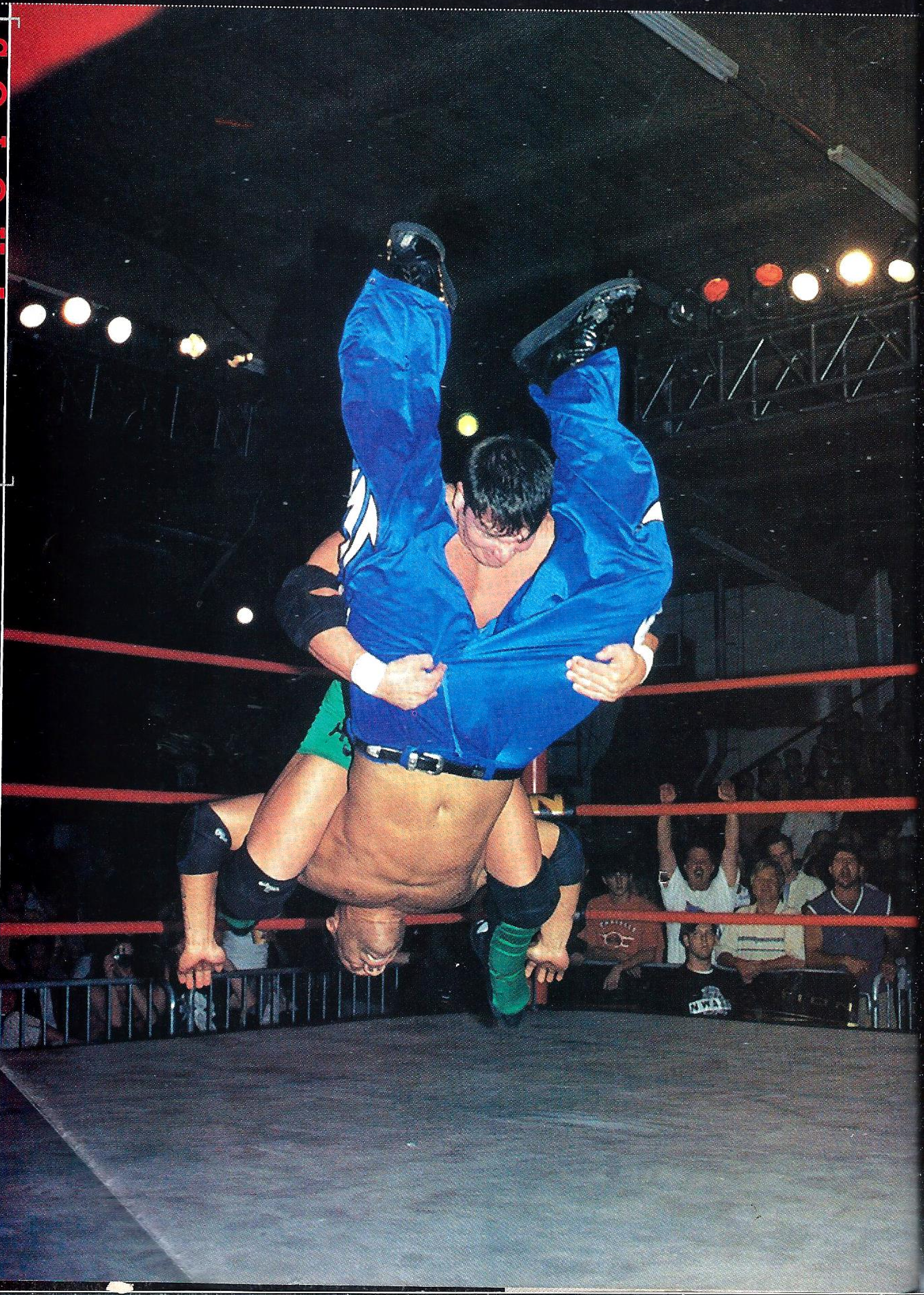
Q: Looking back on your wrestling career, especially now since you've had so much success in acting, politics, and writing, are there any moments in your wrestling career that stack up to your success in these other areas?

A: I think my highest moments were standing up there at Madison Square Garden, naturally, because that's the ring Mecca of the world. And it's something they can't take from you. As much grief as you take, and I don't believe you should, for being a pro wrestler—I call it ballet with violence—they are exceptional athletes, they are exceptional performers, and they should be looked at artistically for what they do, and they're phenomenal. Even today they are, as they have all been through the ages. And I don't think we need to apologize for it. Remember, NASCAR took abuse for years and years and years, and now it's mainstream. It's one of the biggest things going. There's a niche for everything. I think the other thing I'm proud of is *Saturday Night's Main Event.* Because we were now mainstream, beating *Saturday Night Live* in the ratings. We still have the highest ratings for what they call a special. I'm also extremely proud to have been an announcer at WrestleMania III, when we broke the indoor world record for 93,000 people under the roof. I remember the newspapers in Detroit the next day were saying how marvelously it was run, that there were no problems, and that they only had one kid who had to go to the sickbay, probably because he ate too much popcorn. We broke the record of The Rolling Stones, and I'm exceptionally proud that I was part of that. □

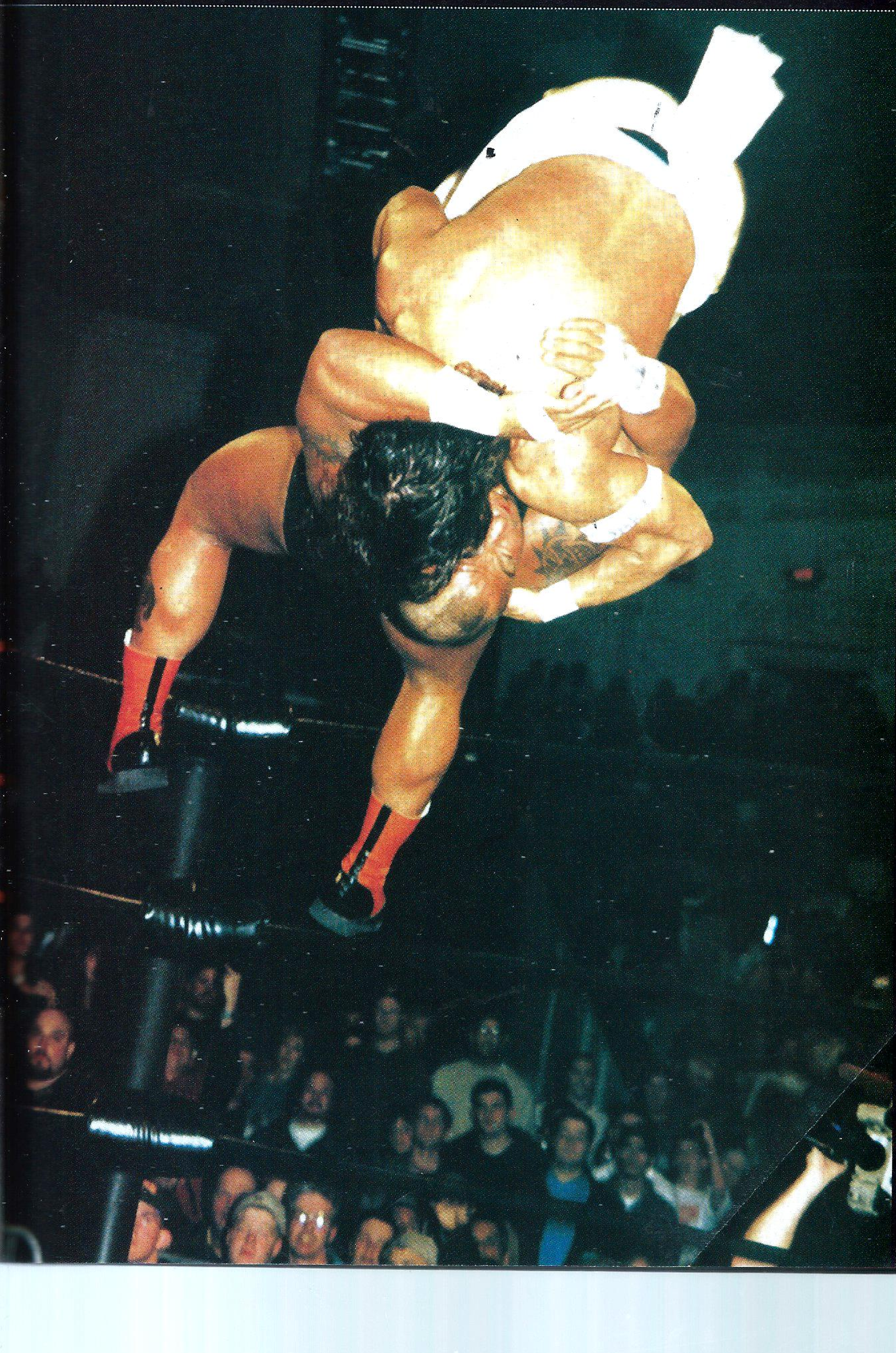


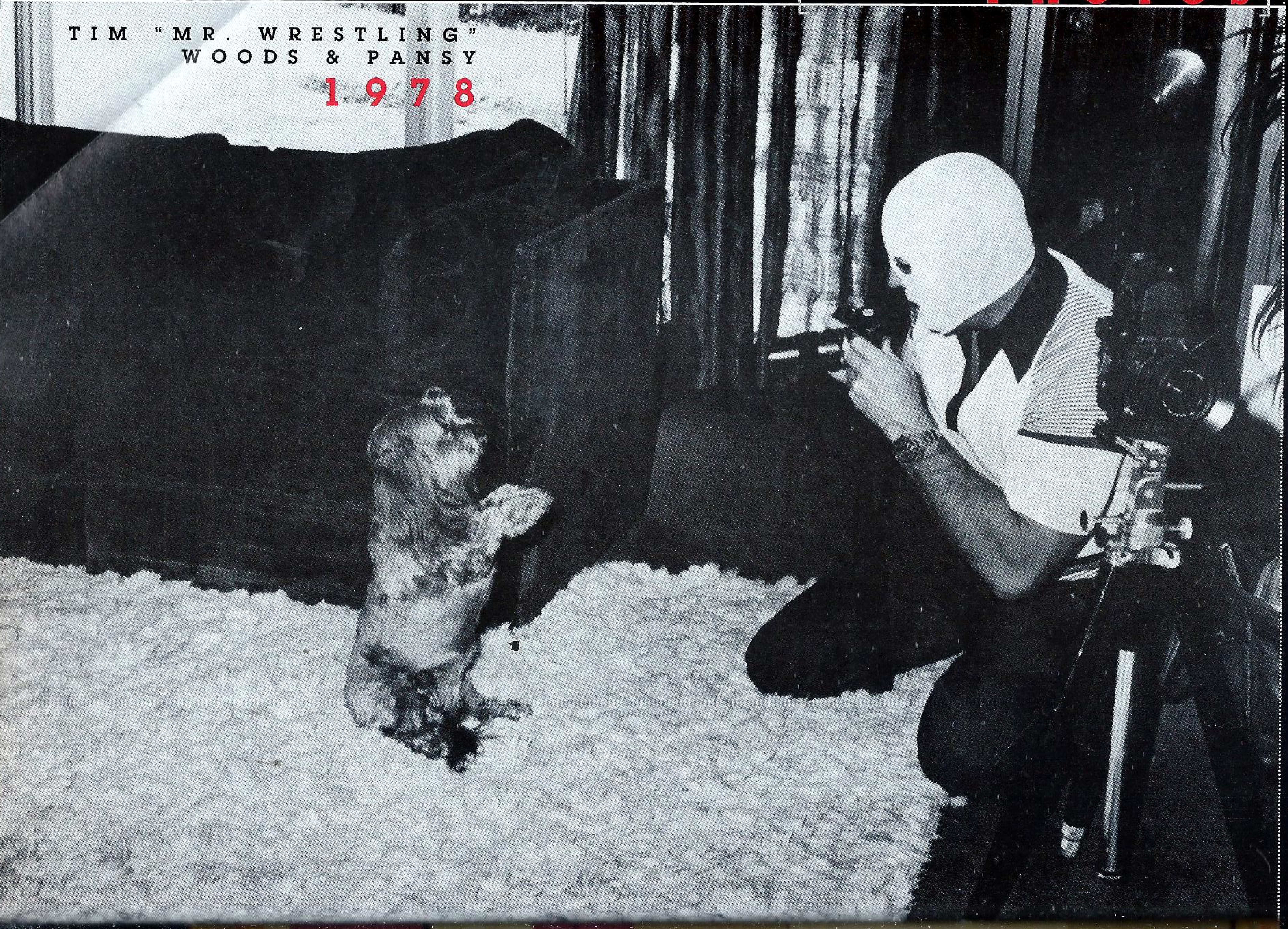
Once upon a time, Ventura wanted to unionize professional wrestling. It didn't work out as he planned, but things worked out well for him. Jesse draws benefits from his membership in the Screen Actors Guild.

A.J. STYLES vs.
SONNY SIAKI
2003

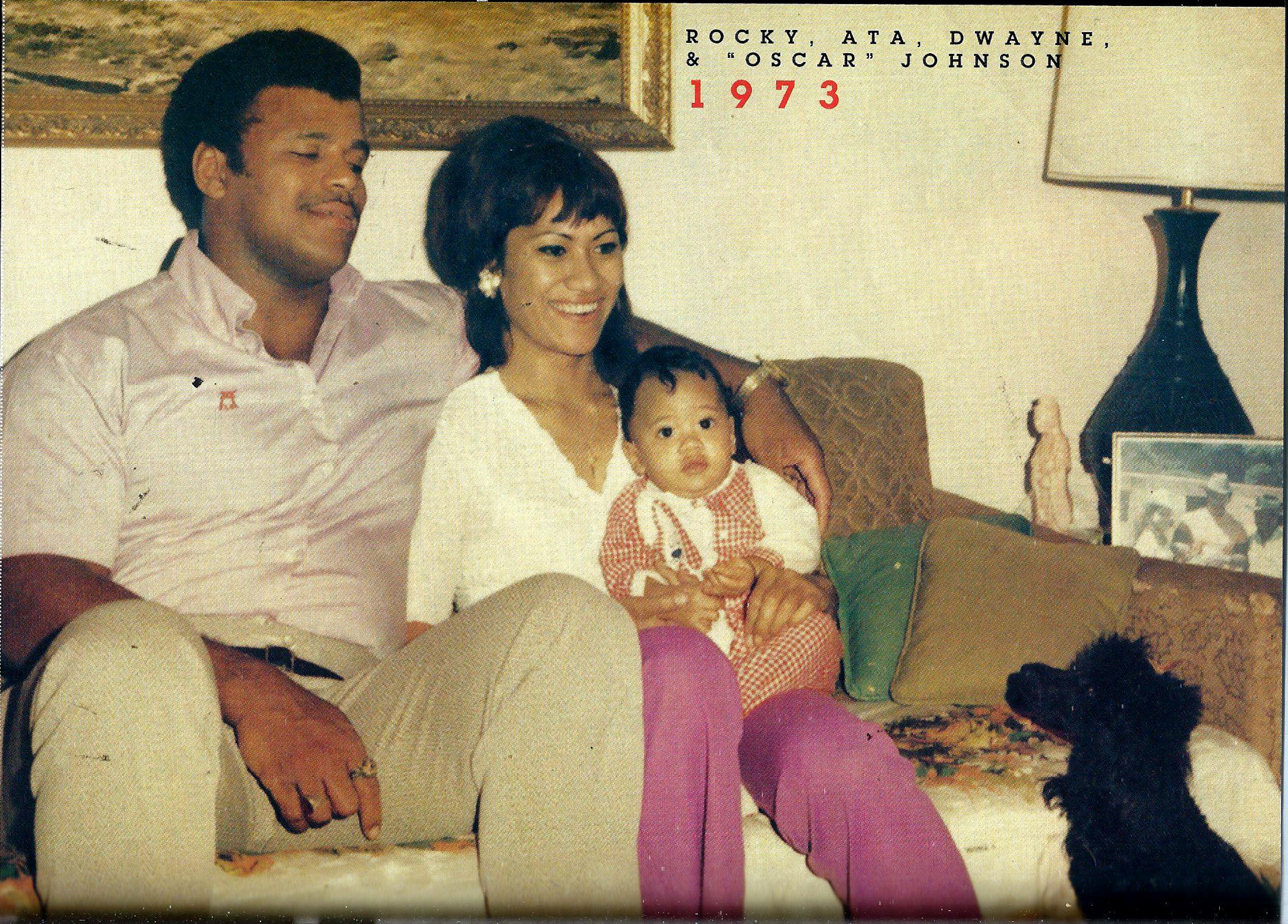


TAZ vs. SABU
1999



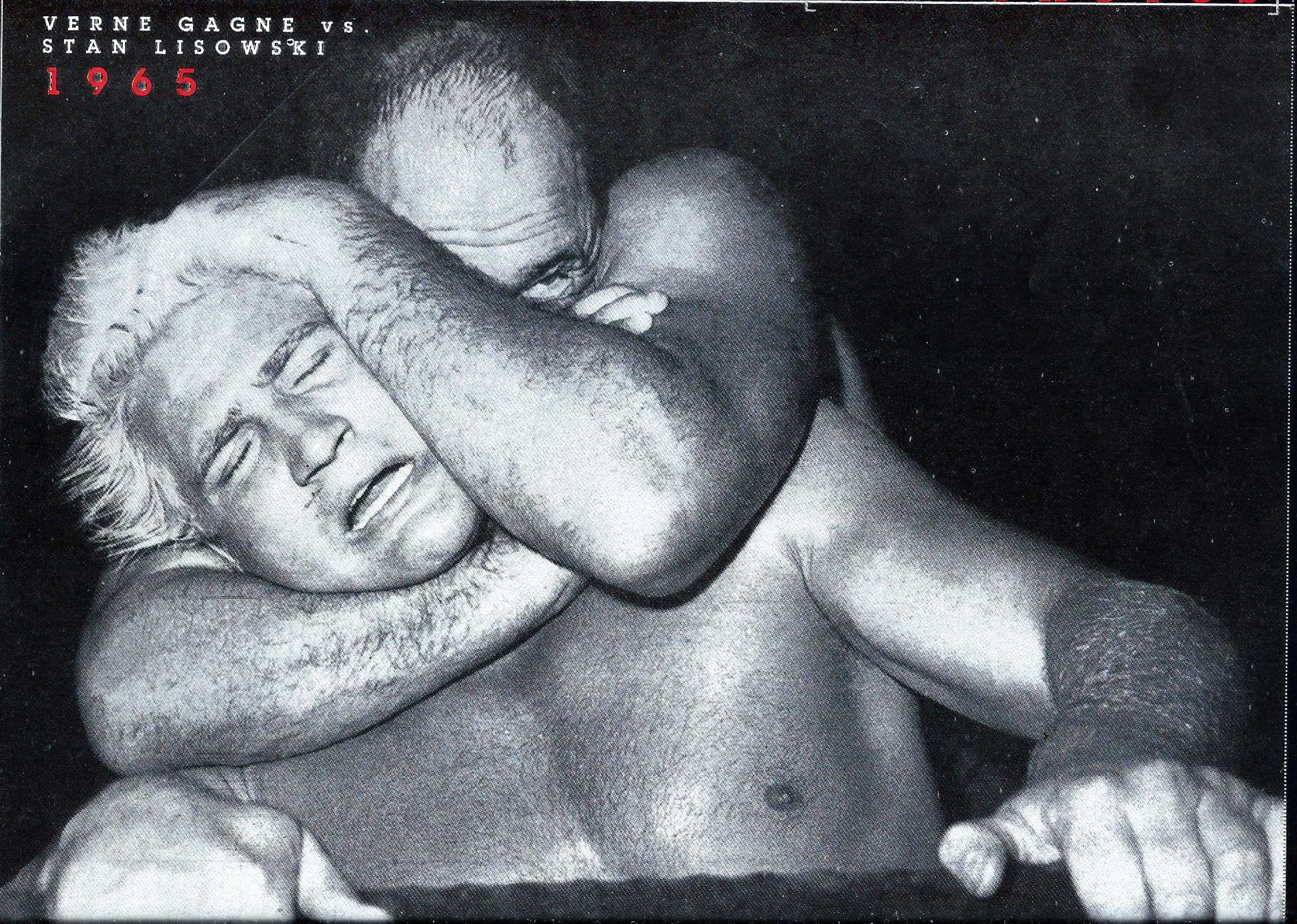


TIM "MR. WRESTLING"
WOODS & PANSY
1978



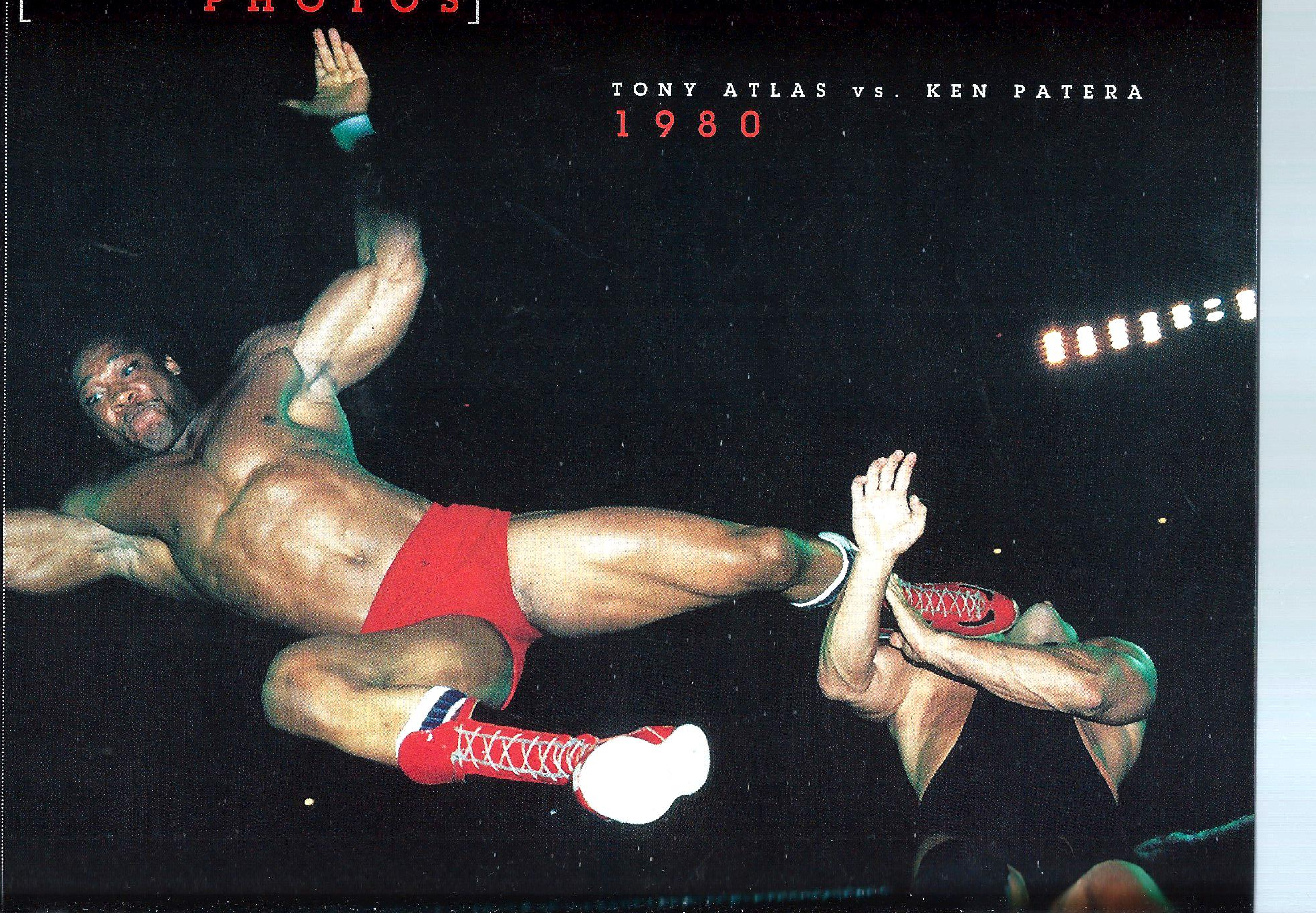
ROCKY, ATA, DWAYNE, & "OSCAR" JOHNSON

1973



VERNE GAGNE vs.
STAN LISOWSKI
1965

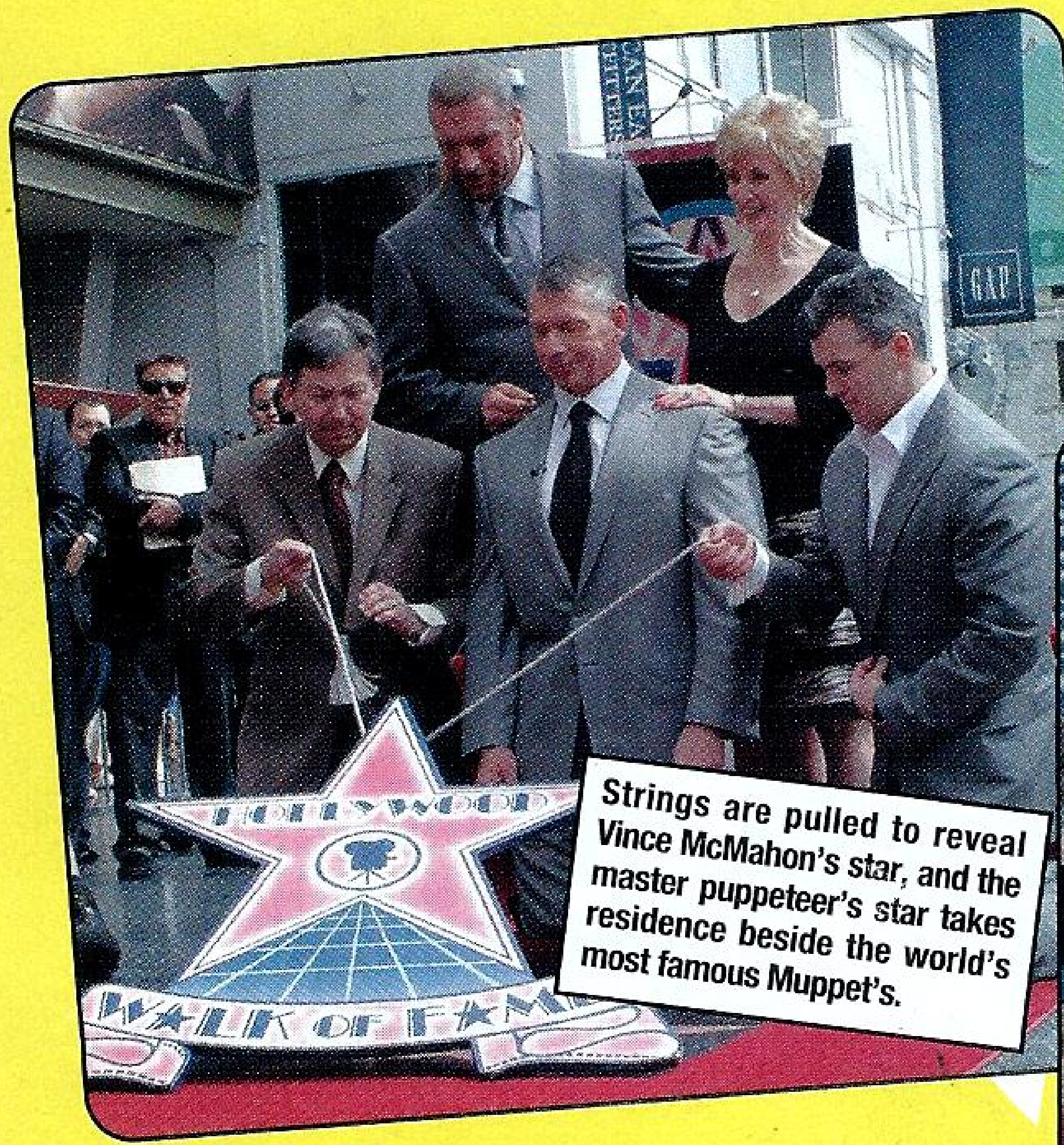
WRESTLING'S GREATEST PHOTOS



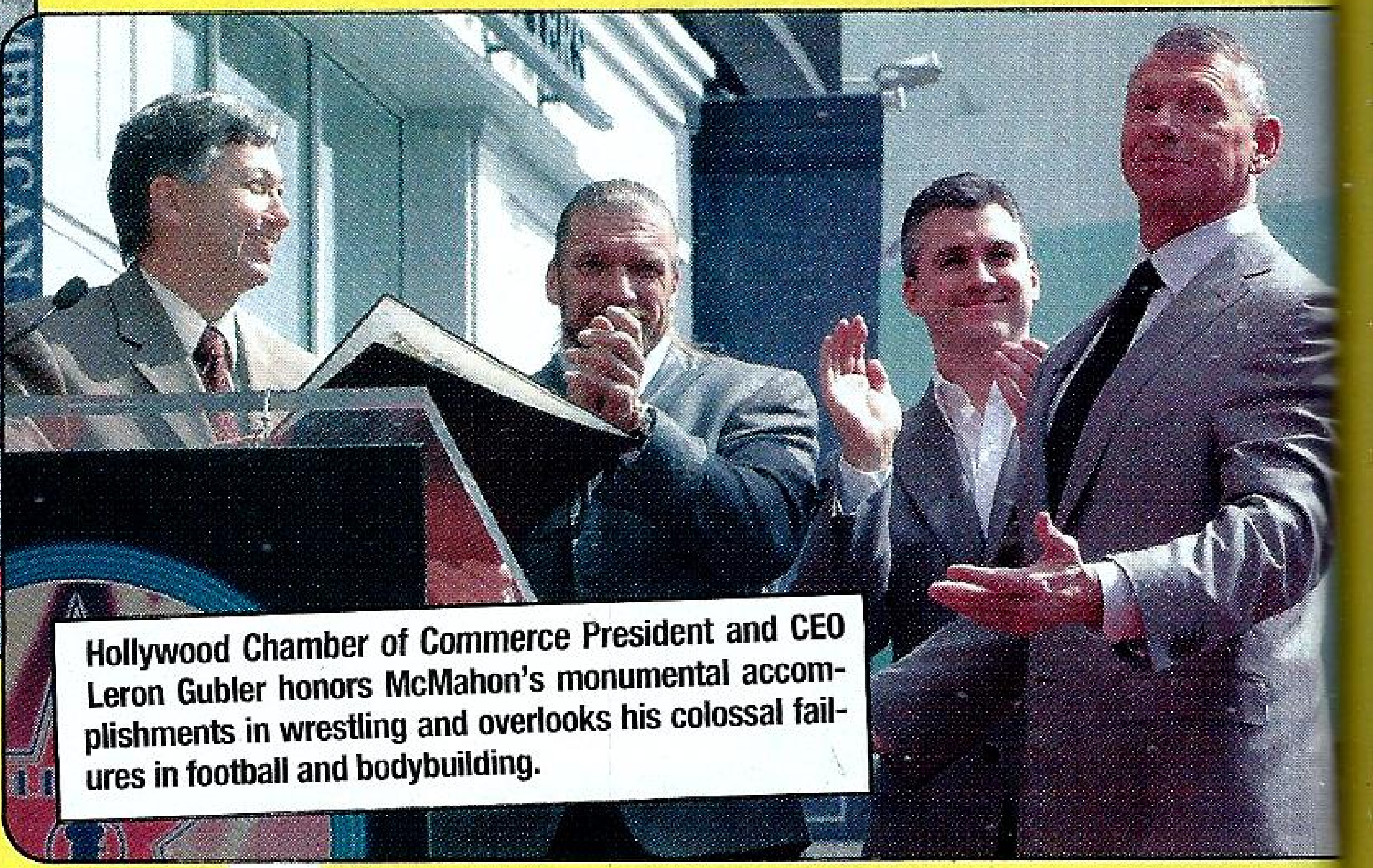
TONY ATLAS vs. KEN PATERA
1980

STAR FOR THE STARMAKER!

Vince McMahon Gets Immortalized In Hollywood



Strings are pulled to reveal Vince McMahon's star, and the master puppeteer's star takes residence beside the world's most famous Muppet's.



Hollywood Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Leron Gubler honors McMahon's monumental accomplishments in wrestling and overlooks his colossal failures in football and bodybuilding.

BY DAVE LENKER
PHOTOS BY SHANE M. KIDDER/NWA

KERMIT THE FROG, you have yourself a new neighbor. Be afraid—be *very* afraid.

This spring, with its 2,257th overall choice (since 1958), the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce offered a star on its vaunted Hollywood Walk of Fame to none other than Vincent Kennedy McMahon. Didn't you just know that Vince wouldn't be able to resist inviting his evil, egotistical, corrupt alter-ago, Mr. McMahon, to say a few words in acceptance.

"I already know I'm a star," he bellowed. "I'm the biggest star of all-time."

Not quite. The 3.5-mile Walk of Fame was established to honor the brightest stars of TV (McMahon's category), radio, motion pictures, recording, and live performance half a century ago. Among the other 2008 honorees were Angela Bassett, Cate Blanchett, Tim Robbins, and Susan St. James (who co-hosted the New York portion of WrestleMania II with Vince), *Brady Bunch*/*Gilligan's Island* creator Sherwood Schwartz, Marvel Comics creator Stan Lee, musicians George Harrison and Christina Aguilera, newsman Bill Geist, comedian/*Deal Or No Deal* host Howie Mandel, and, of course, "makeup legends" The Westmores of Hollywood.

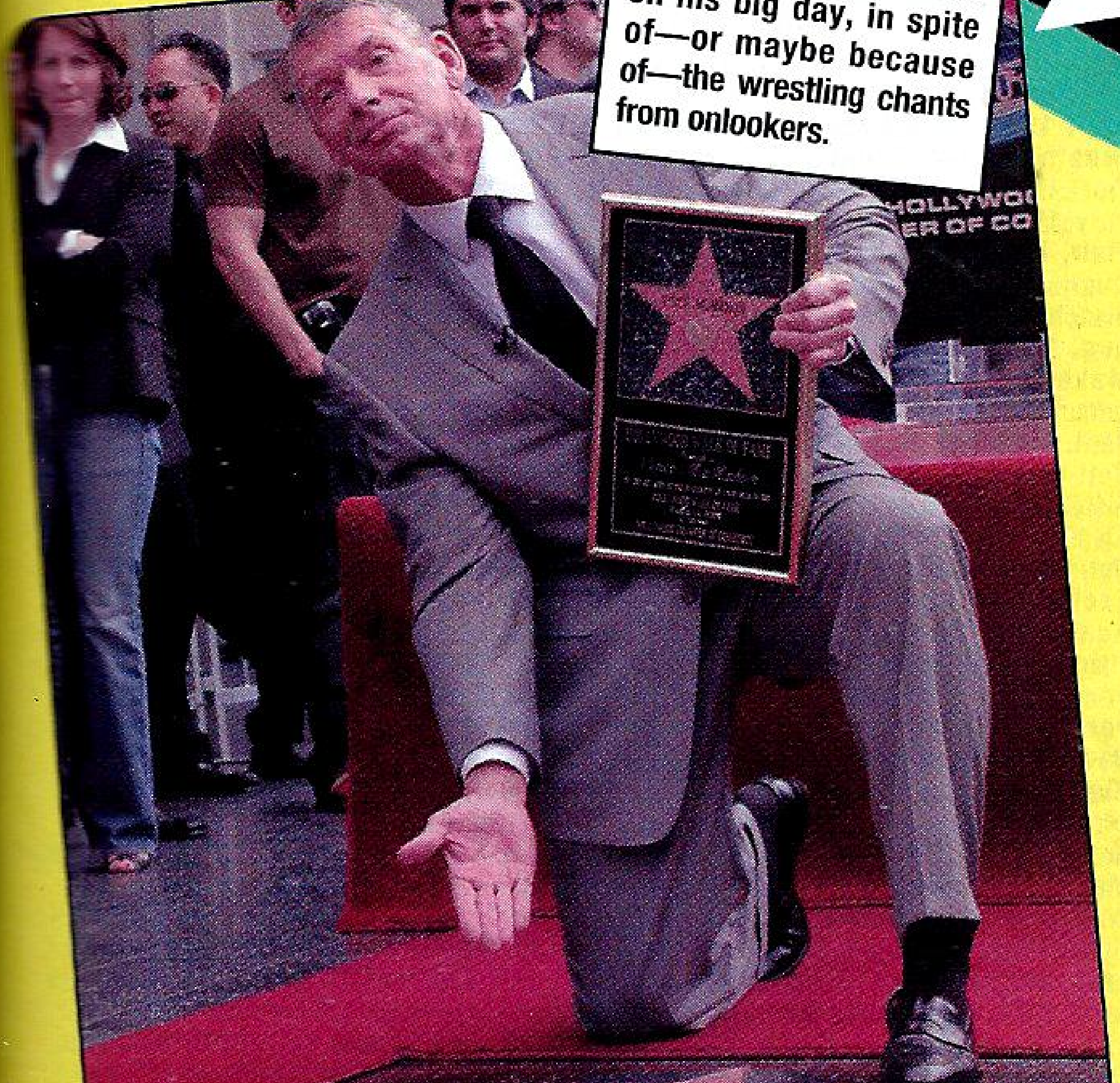
The host of the event lauded McMahon as "a man who has made television history by bringing global attention to the wrestling world." Not to mention the World Bodybuilding Federation, the XFL, the Gobbledygooker, HLA, and Katie Vick. Just kidding, Vinnie Mac.

He seemed a bit confused by the chants of "What?" from the enthusiastic throng of fans who assembled to watch the brief ceremony. The random, hushed, and good-natured chants of "You screwed Bret!" "Cena sucks" and "Where's Kamala? only added to the atmosphere.

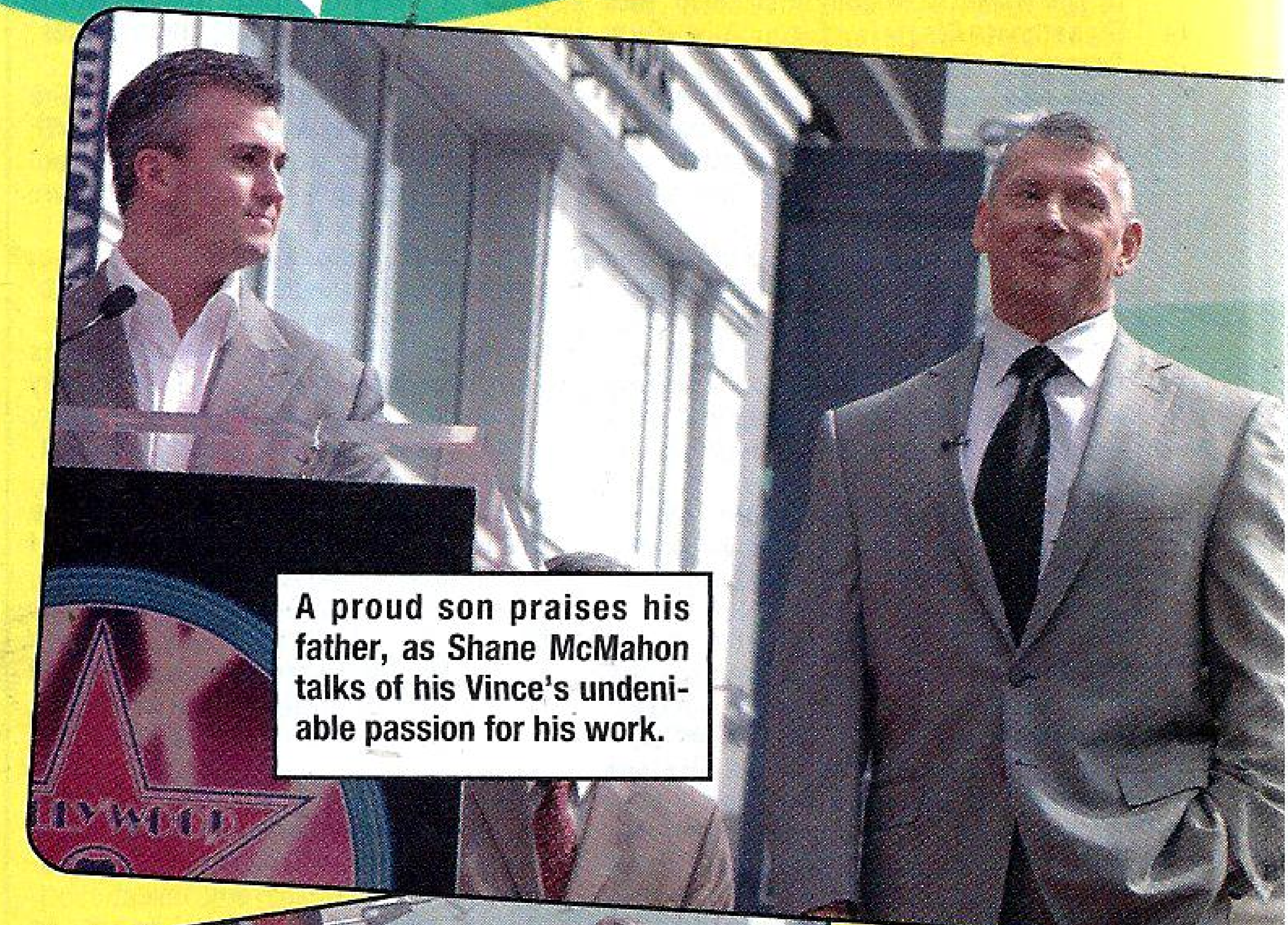
Also on hand were Vince's wife, Linda, son Shane, and son-in-law Triple-H, the latter two of whom spoke to the crowd.

Shane recounted a story when a 25-year-old Vince learned from his father, with barely any notice, that he would become his new TV blow-by-blow man that very night. Shane also praised his father effusively. "Every single day, you breathe passion and life into this product," he said.

When it was Triple-H's turn, he eased into DX mode, asking the fans, "Are ... you ... ready for Vince McMahon to be on the Hollywood Walk of Fame?"

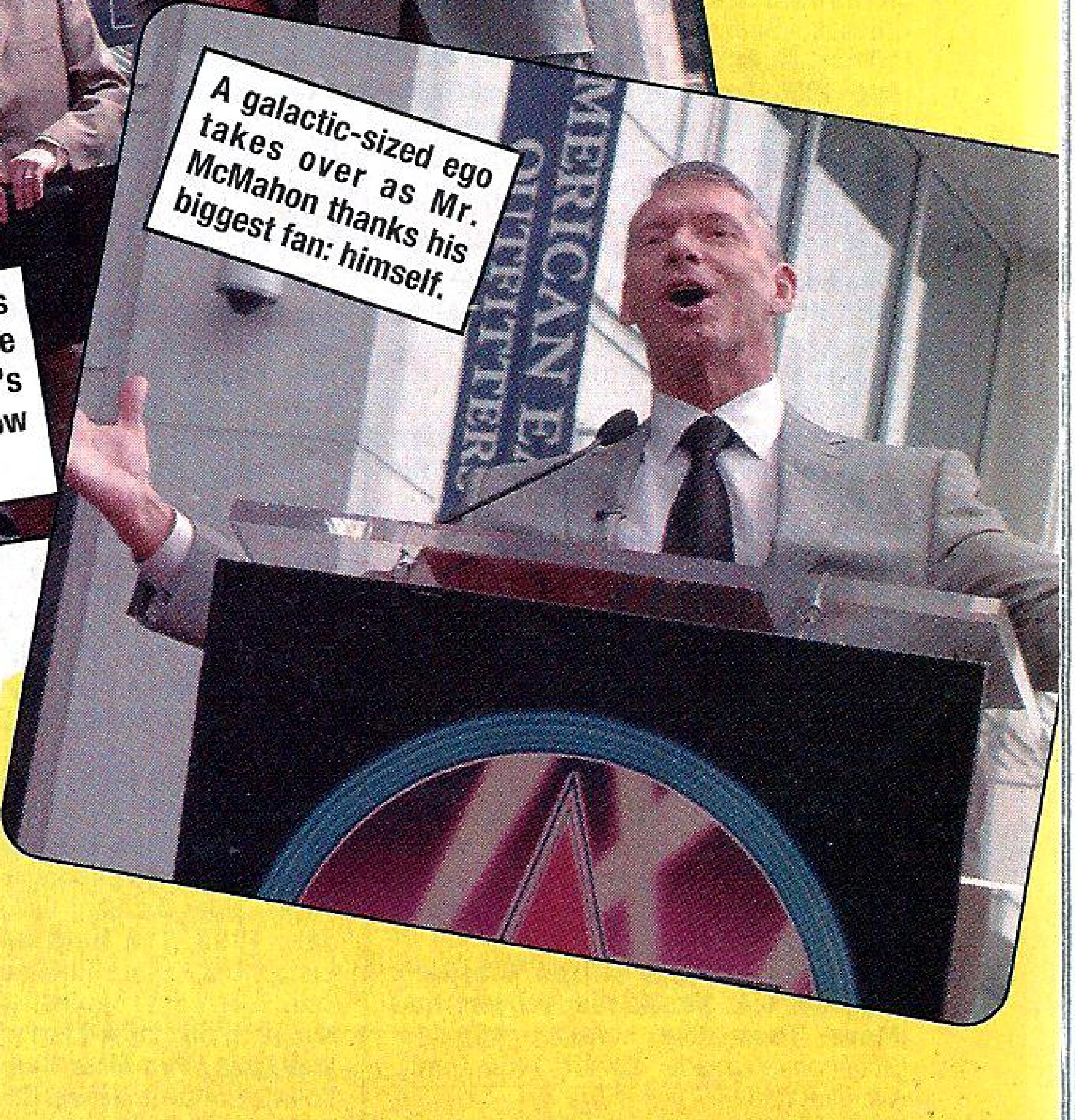


Vince McMahon shined on his big day, in spite of—or maybe because of—the wrestling chants from onlookers.



A proud son praises his father, as Shane McMahon talks of his Vince's undeniable passion for his work.

Triple-H continues Shane's sentiment, citing gruesome examples of Mr. McMahon's enthusiasm for the big show WWE delivers weekly.



A galactic-sized ego takes over as Mr. McMahon thanks his biggest fan: himself.

He tried to keep the tone serious for a while as he called WWE "the greatest brand in the world" and Vince himself "the greatest father-in-law in the world … I consider him to be my father as much as I can." But he lightened up when discussing Vince's humanitarian work and almost described all-too-vividly how big the WWE chairman's heart is.

Describing just how good a boss Vince is, he pondered, "How many of you have a boss who would let you stick [his] head up The Big Show's butt?"

Ah, the memories of great DX storylines.

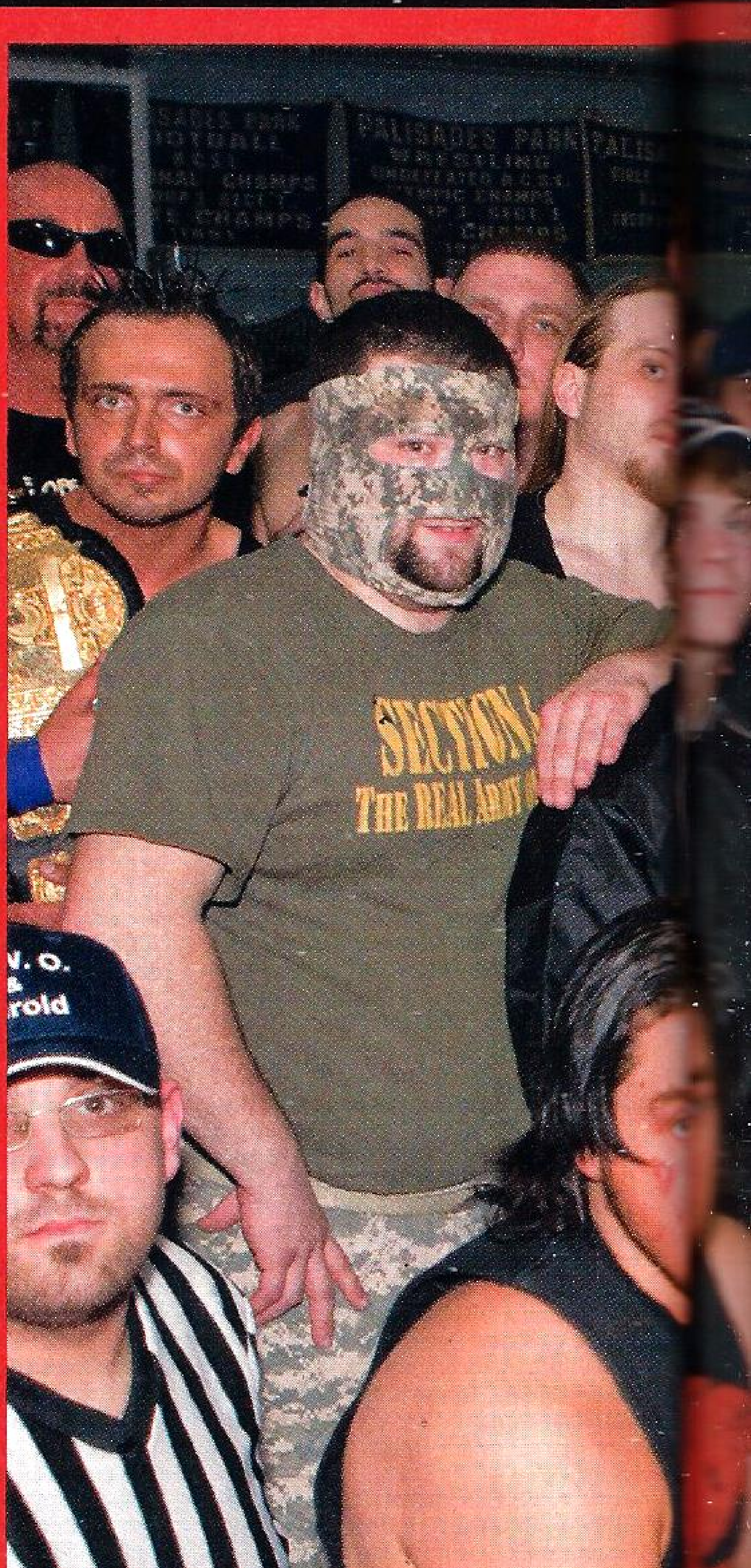
When Vince finally got his turn to speak, he humbly thanked all the fans, current and previous generations, as well as his staff and all the superstars, past and present, who made him the success he is today. Then Mr. McMahon finally took his cue.

"Most importantly, I would like to thank … *me!"* he said, his voice becoming noticeably deeper and raspier. "Do you realize how many people in this world wanted to walk on me? God forbid they happen to be walking their dog at the same time."

A little crass for sure, but that's Vince for you. A star on his own terms, but a deserving one, no doubt. His star will be right next to the world's most famous frog's. There goes the neighborhood, Kermit. □

A TRUE CHAMPION

BWO Steps Up To Honor A BRAVE FAN Battling Cancer



When the Bodyslam Wrestling Organization learned the family of an ailing, local boy was struggling to pay its medical bills, the promotion put on an event that turned everyone's tears to smiles—even if it was for just one night

Harold Wright may need a cane to keep himself upright, but his spirits were lifted in ways unimaginable by the overwhelming support of the BWO and its fans. THE WRESTLER is pretty stingy with its recognition of "World Champions," but in this case, we're happy to make an exception!

BY DAVE ROSENBAUM
PHOTOS BY ROBERT PAYES

HAROLD WRIGHTINGTON STOOD near the locker room at Palisades Park High School in New Jersey surrounded by wrestlers. In a few moments, the 12-year-old boy and his parents—Mark and Sandra—would make their way to the first-row ringside seats that had been provided them for the Bodyslam Wrestling Organization card, but for now, Harold was soaking in the atmosphere, enjoying the backstage experience that few people, let alone pre-teenage boys, ever get to experience.

He didn't realize that Hands Off and Biff, the two BWO managers standing next to him, were doing their best to keep him from walking out to his seat. And he might not have heard the words of BSO President Richie Rotten, who was addressing the near-capacity crowd on this special night.

"There are champions who become champions at their chosen sport because they excel and they're great at what they do," Rotten told the crowd. "But then there are champions of life who become true inspirations for all of us. Harold Wrightington is a true inspiration in life."

Then the song "Thunderstruck" began playing on the gym's P.A. system, and the fans started chanting, "Harold! Harold!"

"Oh, my God," Harold said to Biff and Hands Off. "Why are they chanting my name?"

Then the curtain opened, and all eyes were on 12-year-old Harold Wrightington—12-year-old brain cancer victim

Twelve-year-old brain cancer victim Harold Wrightington had no idea BWO's "True Champion" night would be held in his honor when Hands Off and Biff escorted him through the curtain.

Harold Wrightington—as he made his way to the ring.

"It was awesome," Rotten said, fondly recalling the sight of Harold climbing into the ring, exchanging high-fives with the 20 BWO wrestlers who were there to greet him, and soaking in the adoration of the fans, all of whom were there not only to see an exciting night of independent wrestling, but also to support a boy who had been dealt an unlucky blow.

He wasn't unlucky on this night. Before the card began, Harold was presented an exact duplicate of the Bodyslam Wrestling championship belt.

"You are our first ever rue champion of the world," Rotten told Harold as he strapped the belt around his waist. Then, as everyone in the building dried the tears from their eyes, Harold went to his ringside seat and wore the belt the rest of the night.

"True Champions" night at Palisades Park High School was perhaps the most impressive in a series of outpourings of emotion and support for Harold and his family. A few months earlier, 300 people attended a fundraiser party for Harold, who was diagnosed with cancer the previous November and had an aggressive tumor removed from his brain. A few weeks after the BWO show, the Make-A-Wish Foundation arranged for Harold to meet Triple-H.

But BWO's "True Champions" night was special because ...well, how often does a 12-year-old boy get to enjoy an entire evening of pro wrestling that's entirely about him?

"Something like this puts things in

BWO President Richie Rotten addressed the crowd and the BWO crew prior to Harold's entrance. The BWO's efforts raised more than $13,000 for the Wrightington family.

B. W. O.
&
Harold
HANDS OFF
THE OFF ARMY
THE ... HAS ARRIVED

Rotten hands Harold the BWO "True Champion" title belt BWO created for him. The promotion also presented Harold and his father with a case in which to display the strap.

perspective," said BWO wrestler Steve Off, who has had a series of tryouts with WWE. "It's gratifying that I can use this gift I have to make this kid smile. Yeah, we raised money for him, more than $13,000, and that's important, but we affected him personally, too. We did something special for him."

And this event truly was a community outpouring of emotion and support for Harold. The event was sponsored by Outback Steakhouse, which donated an all-you-can-eat dinner. Tickets for the event were $10 and $20, and every penny went to Harold's family, which is struggling to pay over $180,000 in medical bills not covered by health insurance. The ring was donated. The venue was donated. The referees and wrestlers worked for free.

"True Champions" night was born when Steve Off, who lives in nearby Cliffside Park, New Jersey, heard about Harold's story. He spoke to BWO owner Glenn Ulrich and BWO booker/wrestler Chaos, and they moved quickly to make the event happen.

"It was an emotional evening," Rotten said. "It just reminded all of us that it's not about how much money you can make. In this world, it's about the lives you touch and who you can help. Our legacy isn't going to be how much money we make or what kind of house we live in, but carrying it forward and making a difference. I told the guys in the dressing room before the card, 'All the money in the world isn't going to change this kid's situation. But if we can use our ability to put a smile on this kid's face and help him and his parents escape the daily trauma of life, then we've done what we're here to do."

Mission accomplished. Sure, there were tears all around, from the wrestlers, the referees, the managers, and the fans, but Harold was all smiles as he sat at ringside, watching Eric Cooper, Chaos, and Ulrich beat Tommy Face, Dr. Callahan, and Evan Myers in the main event.

"I'm only five years older than Harold," said Ulrich, who is only 17. "I just finished my high school wrestling career, and I'm looking forward to a long career in pro wrestling, but this forced me to take a few steps back and appreciate life. He's 12. I'm 17. You start to realize you're not as invincible as you think. So seeing Harold sitting at ringside, cheering me on and smiling, was very special."

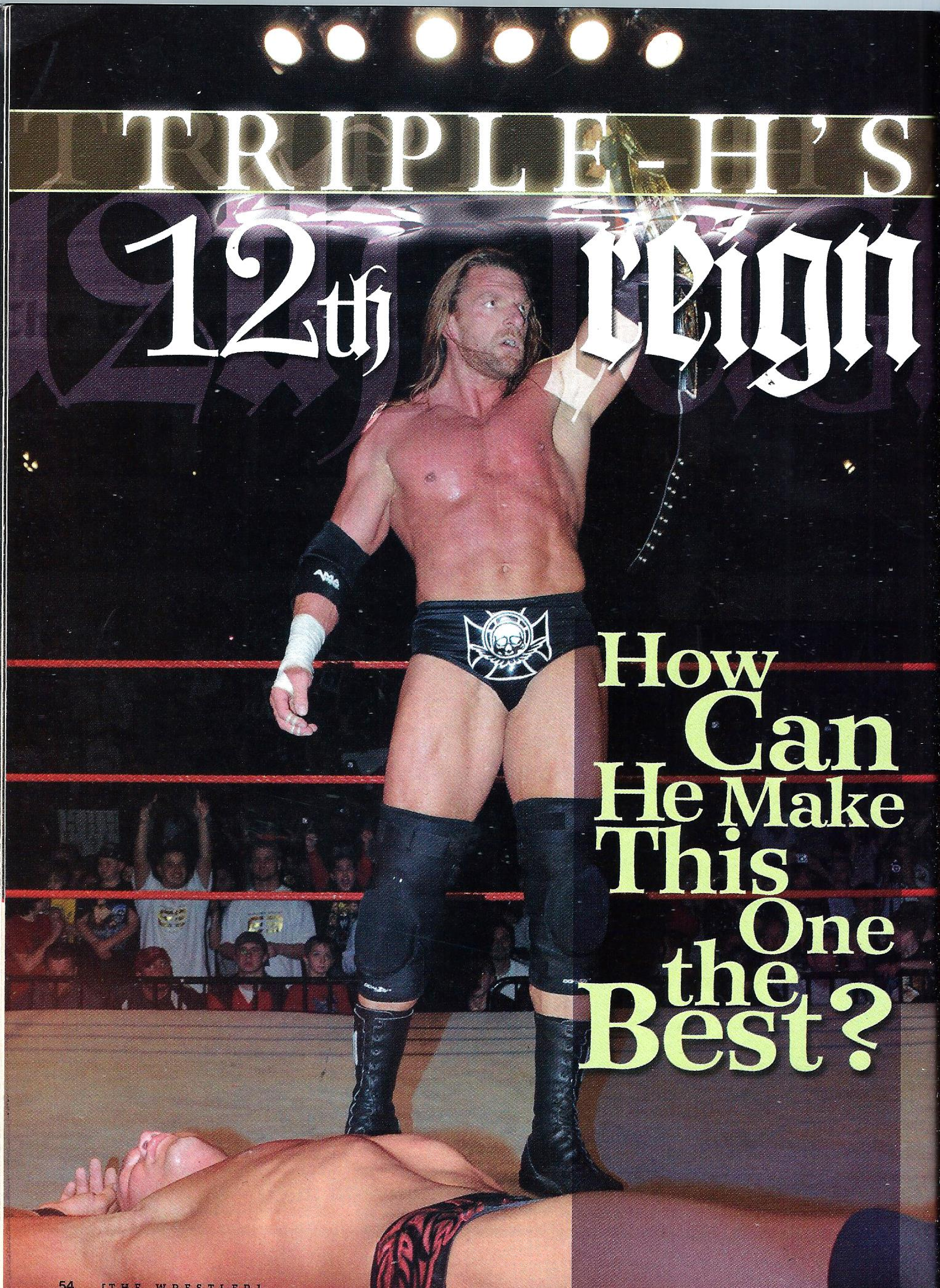
When the night ended and Harold enjoyed one more ovation, Rotten handed Harold and his father a display case for the championship belt, and Harold's father said, "When we get home, we can put it in the case."

Harold shook his head and smiled.

"No way," he said. "I'm sleeping with it! □

TRIPLE-H'S 12th reign

How Can He Make This One the Best?



To go down as one of the greatest champions in wrestling history, Triple-H must do something with his 12th reign that will put him on par with the Flairs, Gagnes, and Races

BY BILL MELTZER

LOVE HIM OR hate him, Triple-H has been the standard-bearer for the modern WWE. Even his critics can't dismiss the importance of "The Game's" combined 12 world championship reigns. He's collected more title belts than self-coined nicknames.

Triple-H went much of the past three years without holding either major WWE title. That was due partially to a torn quadriceps and partially by design—he chose to participate in a lengthy DeGeneration X reunion storyline. Yet it always seemed inevitable the "Cerebral Assassin" would reclaim one of the big belts.

Sure enough, Triple-H became a seven-time Raw World champion by beating Randy Orton and former titlists John Cena and JBL in a four-way elimination match at Backlash.

"I don't make idle threats or empty promises," Helmsley said shortly after the match. "I have said all along that it was time to reclaim what's mine. Others may borrow my property from time to time, but the championship is my exclusive property, and there's not a damn thing Orton or Cena or anyone else can do about it. This belt defines me, and I define this belt."

There is a good deal of truth to Triple-H's boast. His 11 previous reigns have, in a sense, dictated the way the wrestling business operates today. Gone are the days of iconic world champions, such as Lou Thesz, Bruno Sammartino, Bob Backlund, Verne Gagne, Hulk Hogan, or Ric Flair, who hold the title for two years or more.

In the past, world title changes often marked a changing of the guard—sometimes with a transitional champ like Stan Stasiak or The Iron Sheik reigning briefly in between two prolific titlists.

Photo by Joe Zanolle

WrestleMania X8 was a memorable night for Triple-H, who defeated Chris Jericho in the main event to become the WWE undisputed champion.

Today, to paraphrase Triple-H himself, it's all about the reigns—not to mention the pay-per-view buy rates, catch phrases, and dramatic ring entrances. "The Game" has piled up his 12 championship victories (and 11 title losses) in just nine years, but has never by himself been a gate attraction on par with Steve Austin or The Rock.

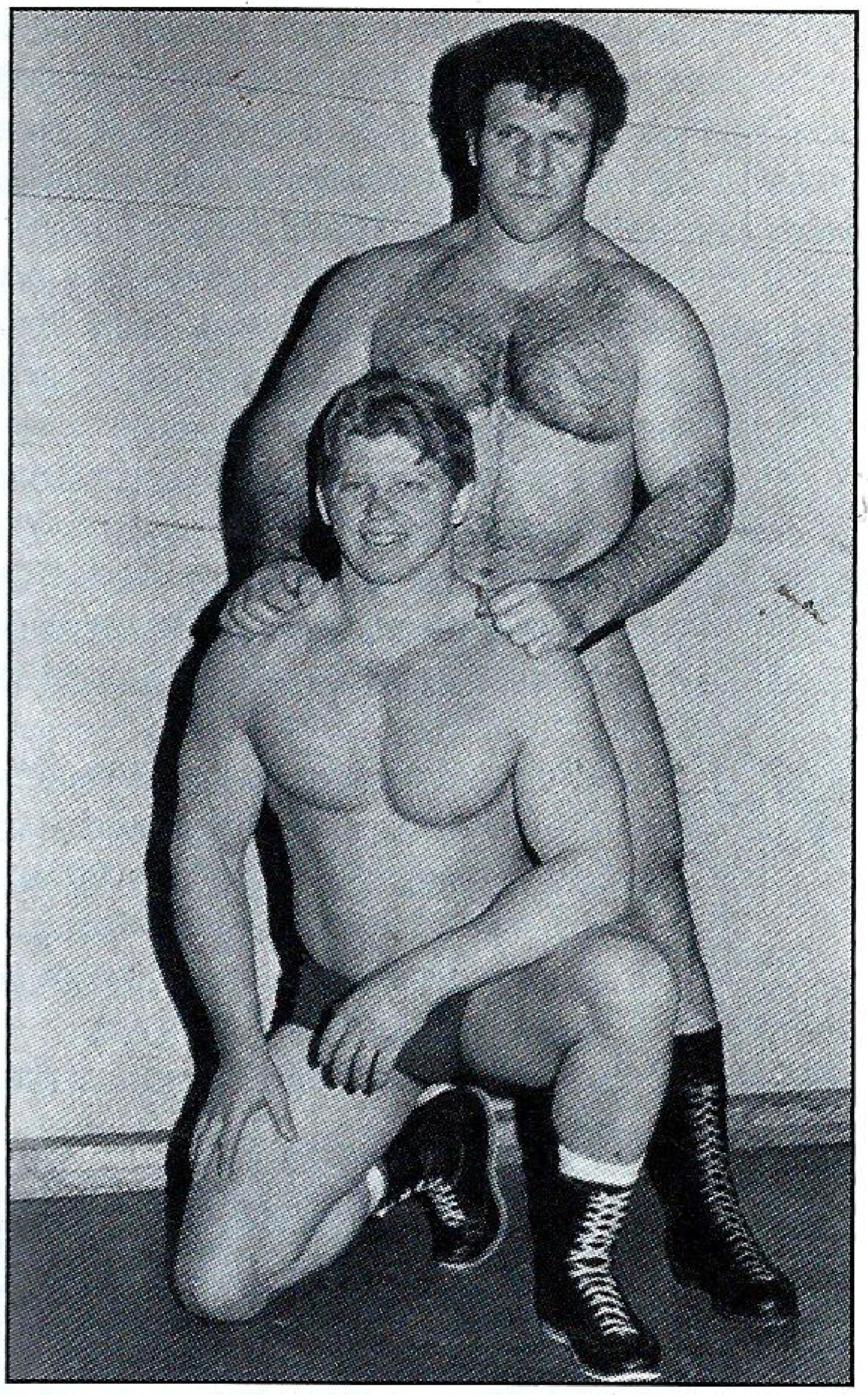
In terms of the length of each reign, none of Triple-H's 11 prior stints rank anywhere near the top in federation history. His longest previous Raw World championship reign was 118 days; the 31st longest reign in federation history. His longest Smackdown World championship stint was 280 days, tied for 12th-longest in the combined histories of the two WWE world titles.

In and of themselves, none of the reigns have been especially memorable. Ask a casual fan to name whom Hulk Hogan defeated and lost to in his first and second championship reigns and you'll usually get the correct answers right away (Hogan defeated The Iron Sheik and Randy Savage; lost to Andre the Giant and The Ultimate Warrior).

Ask even the most diehard Triple-H fans to recall the details of his earliest Raw World and Smackdown World title reigns, and they'll be reaching for their *PWI Almanac*.

That's not to say Triple-H hasn't had some classic matches through the years, but in today's brand of sports entertainment, the title reigns, opponents, and matches have a way of swirling together.

That is exactly why Triple-H, who is heart-attack serious about leaving his mark on wrestling history, must do something *extra* special with his current reign—something that will distinguish this championship from the previous 11.



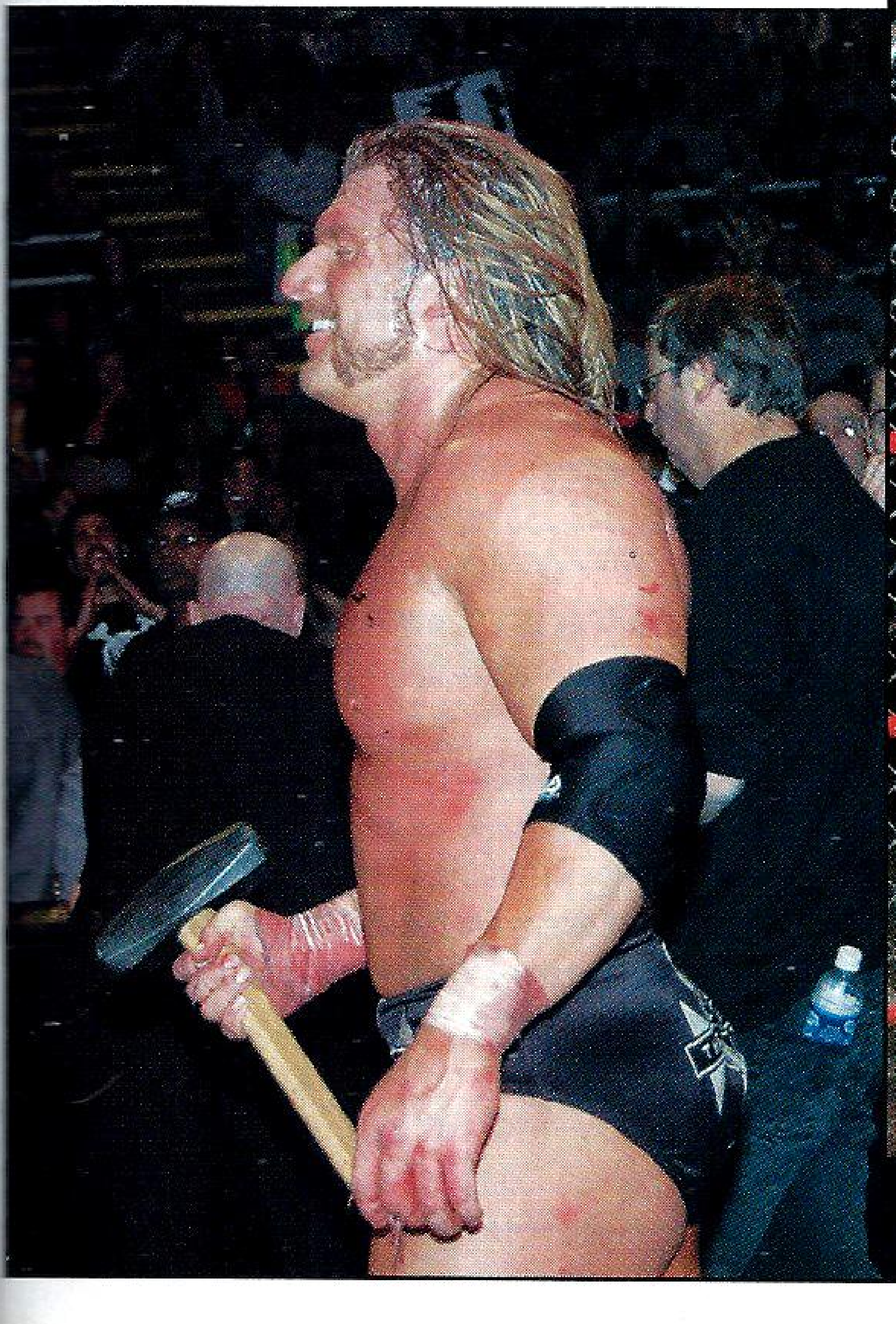
Bruno Sammartino and Bob Backlund were two of the WWF's most dominant world champions ever. Triple-H may have surpassed their number of championships, but he has never had a sustained title reign.

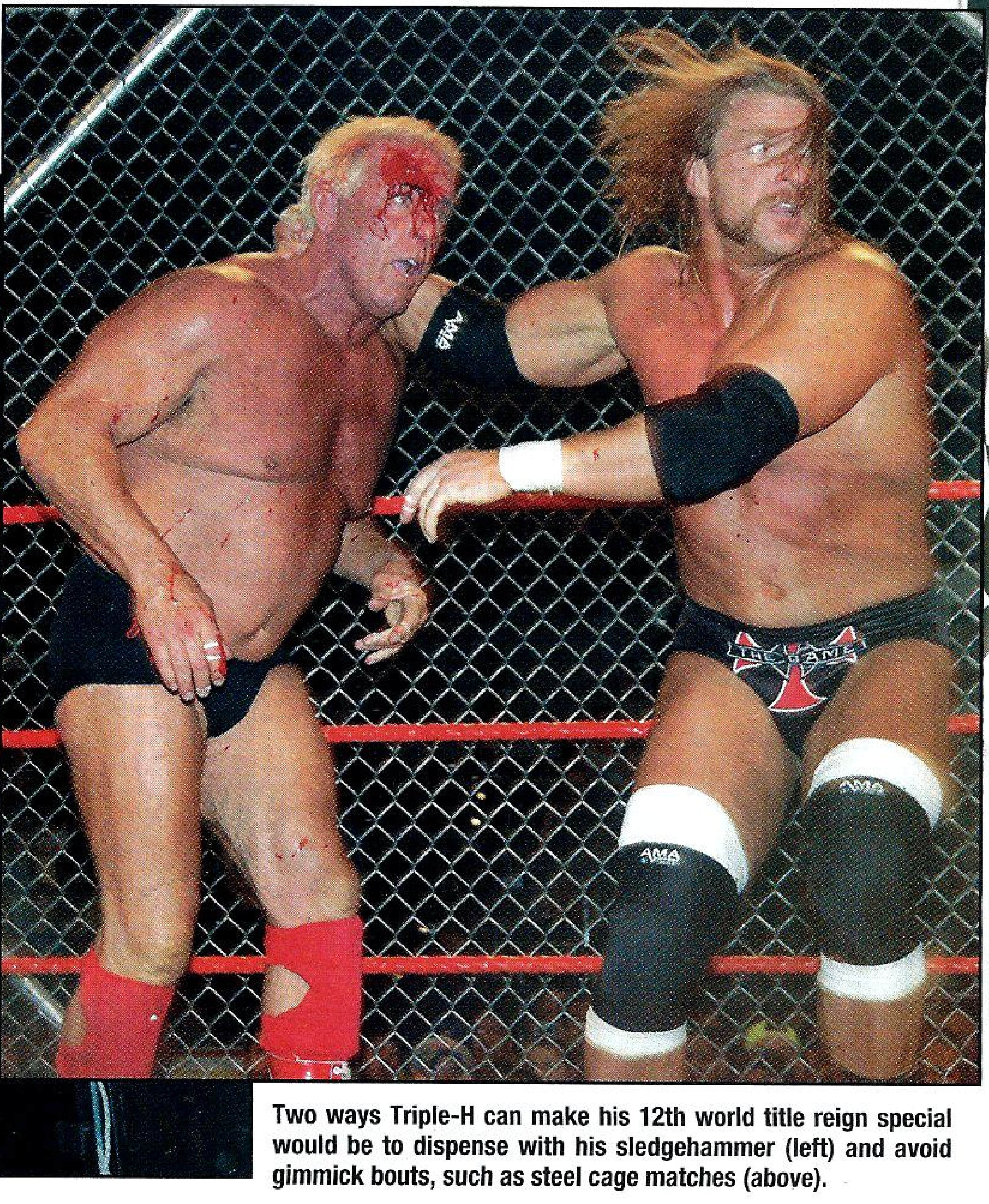
"Hell, I know how he won his first title, because I was the victim," former titlist Mick Foley said with a laugh. "But as a three-time world champion who reigned for less than two months combined, I can tell you that it's the honor of winning the title several times that really matters, not the length of the title reigns. You're still announced as a guy who held the world title X-number of times. Nowadays, people don't say, 'Yeah, but how long did he ever keep the belt?' It doesn't matter. That's one of the ways the business has changed over the years."

From a sheer longevity perspective, chances are good that Triple-H's current world title reign will not come much closer to matching the top 10 all-time reigns than his past runs. Even so, the 38-year-old titlist seems driven to make his current reign his best ever.

"Call it competitiveness, pride, or ego, but Triple-H is a driven man," WWE analyst Thomas Pilliard said. "In his heart, he believes he deserves to be ranked right up there with Flair or Race. You can also be sure he especially wants to be remembered as a worthier world champion than The Rock, Steve Austin, Kurt Angle, or Bret Hart. Triple-H was like a caged lion during Cena's reigns on Raw, but he also realized his time would come again."

As much as Triple-H says he couldn't care less what his detractors think, his actions suggest the opposite. Outside the ring, Triple-H has done everything within his power to





Two ways Triple-H can make his 12th world title reign special would be to dispense with his sledgehammer (left) and avoid gimmick bouts, such as steel cage matches (above).

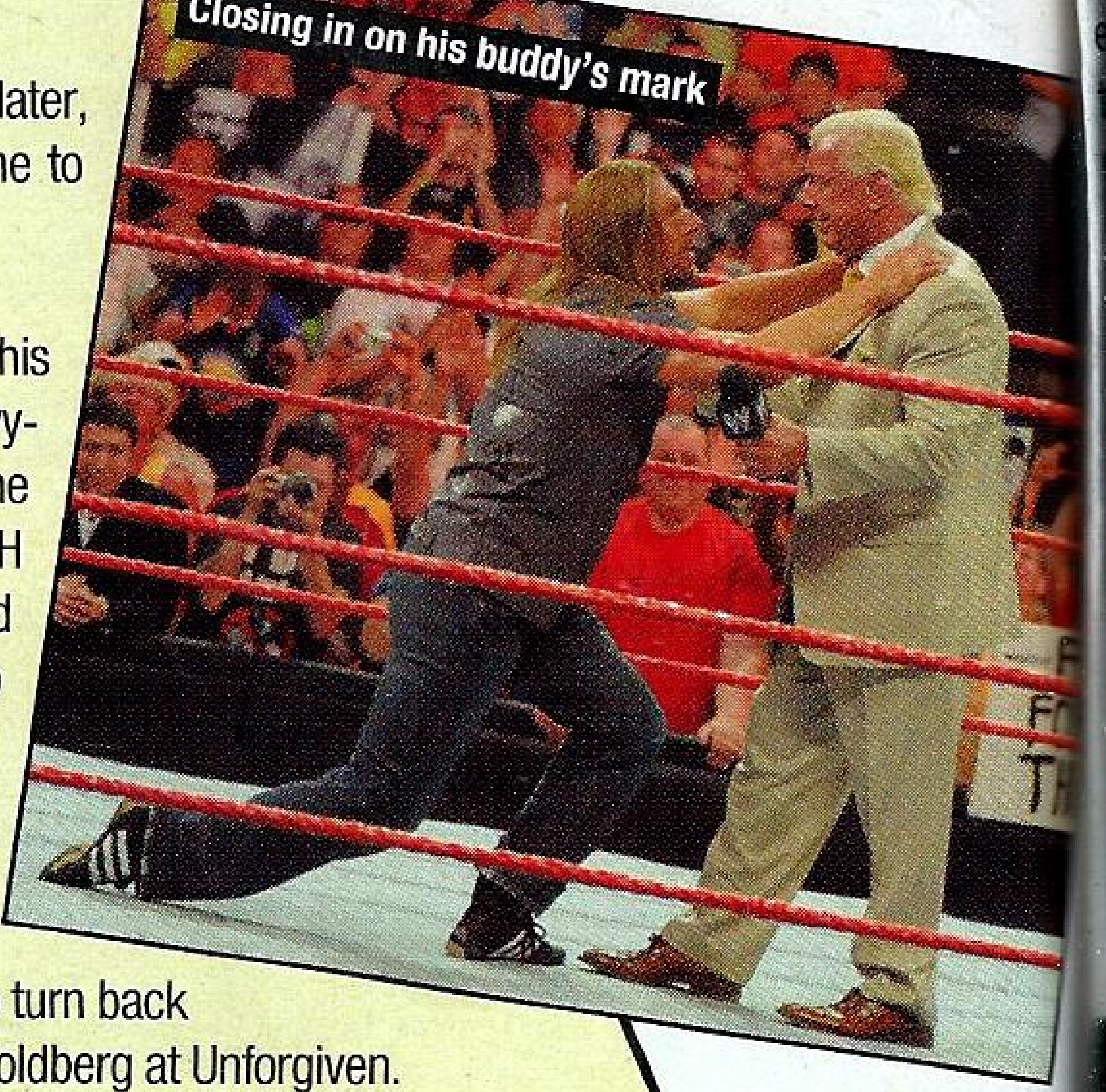
cultivate the idea that he belongs on the game's "All-Time Greats" list. From his impeccably tailored suits and verbosity to the frequent proclamations of his own intellect and ring generalship, Helmsley has consciously advanced the notion that he's his generation's answer to Ric Flair or Nick Bockwinkel.

Inside the squared circle, Helmsley has long since proven to be the methodical technician he claims to be. He can adjust to opponents of a variety of styles and sizes. Like Flair, he seems to get better the longer a match lasts, and he can perform as well in a bloodbath as he can in a technical exchange of maneuvers.

Even when he's cast as a babyface, Triple-H wrestles with a viciousness that seems geared as much at shutting up those who doubt his legacy as it is at winning the match.

"There will always be the people who focus only on his marriage into the McMahon family," said Pilliard. "That just rolls off Triple-H's back. What still drives him is the burning desire to shatter any doubt over his place among all-time world champions."

How can Triple-H accomplish


Closing in on his buddy's mark

Is The 12th Time The Charm?

Here's a look back at the highlights of HHH's 12 title reigns:

#1 **WWF World championship (August 23, 1999–September 16, 1999)**
HHH beats Mankind for the World title on Raw. Triple-H loses it a few weeks later to Vince McMahon.

#2 **WWF World championship (September 26, 1999–November 14, 1999)**
In a six-way match at Unforgiven that includes The Rock, Mankind, The Big Show, Davey Boy Smith, and Kane, Triple-H pins The Rock to win the belt. Steve Austin and The Rock challenge him at Survivor Series. The Big Show takes Austin's place, beating HHH and The Rock to win the belt.

#3 **WWF World championship (January 3, 2000–April 30, 2000)**
Triple-H kicks off the new millennium and gets revenge against Big Show on Raw. At WrestleMania 16, HHH defends his belt against The Rock. Two weeks later, Triple-H loses to Chris Jericho, but the decision is reversed. A few weeks later, he loses to The Rock at Backlash.

#4 **WWF World championship (May 21, 2000–June 25, 2000)**
Triple-H defeats The Rock in an iron man match at Judgment Day. A six-man tag match at King of the Ring stipulates the title can change hands if a member of the team of The Rock, Kane, and The Undertaker pin a member of Triple-H's team with Vince and Shane McMahon. Rock pins Vince to win the title.

#5 **WWF World championship (March 17, 2002–April 21, 2002)**
Triple-H regains the title by downing champion Chris Jericho at 'Mania 18. A month later, he drops it to Hulk Hogan. A few weeks later, the WWF officially changes its name to WWE.

#6 **Smackdown World championship (September 2, 2002–November 17, 2002)**
Shortly after SummerSlam, World champion Brock Lesnar signs a deal to defend his belt exclusively on Smackdown. To create separate belts for each brand, the heavyweight championship is created and recognized as the WWE chamionship by the company and the Raw World championship by *PWI*. On September 2, 2002, Triple-H is declared World champion (Smackdown World champion by *PWI*) and challenged on the spot by Ric Flair, who loses. At Survivor Series, Triple-H loses the title to Shawn Michaels in an "Elimination Chamber" match that also involves Chris Jericho, Booker T, Kane, and Rob Van Dam.

#7 **Smackdown World championship (December 15, 2002–September 23, 2003)**
Triple-H starts this run by defeating HBK in a "Three Stages Of Hell" match at Armageddon. HHH takes the first and third falls to retain the title. Triple-H goes on to turn back Michaels, Nash, Booker T, Kane, and Scott Steiner, among others, before losing to Goldberg at Unforgiven.

#8 **Smackdown World championship (December 14, 2003–March 14, 2004)**
Triple-H regains the strap by beating Goldberg and Kane in a triple-threat match at Armageddon. At WM XX, Chris Benoit wins the belt by beating Triple-H and Shawn Michaels in a triple-threat match.

#9 **Smackdown World championship (September 12, 2004–December 6, 2004)**
Triple-H defeats Randy Orton to regain the title, but later vacates it as a result of a disputed three-way match involving himself, Benoit, and Edge.

#10 **Smackdown World championship (January 9, 2005–April 3, 2005)**
Triple-H regains the belt in an "Elimination Chamber" match by beating Jericho, Edge, Batista, and Orton at New Year's Revolution. Batista defeats Triple-H for the championship at WrestleMania 21.

#11 **Raw World championship (October 7, 2007)**
After failing to wrest the belt from Cena, HHH finally recaptures the gold. But the victory is short-lived. Soon after an injured Cena vacates the title, Vince McMahon awards it to Randy Orton at No Mercy. Triple-H challenges Cena on the spot, and wins. But later that same night, Orton defeats Triple-H in a "Last Man Standing" bout to regain the title.

#12 **Raw World championship (April 27, 2008–present)**
Triple-H beats Orton, Cena and JBL in a "Fatal Four-Way" at Backlash.

—Bill Meltzer

that goal his 12th time around? His supporters already believe in his greatness. But even if he won five more world title belts and surpassed Flair's total, Triple-H would still have his share of detractors. What can the "King Of Kings" *realistically* do to win over those who are still on the fence about his place in the sport's pantheon of champions?

Part of the answer may lie in HHH redirecting his "Cerebral Assassin" persona to focus on his caginess inside the ring rather than playing mind games outside of it. Most everything Triple-H says or does is designed to intimidate his opponents, but sometimes his brutality eclipses his pure wrestling ability, and that complicates matters when judging Triple-H against the all-time best.

"Teddy Roosevelt advocated speaking softly and carrying a big stick. Triple-H speaks loudly and carries a sledgehammer," said veteran wrestling journalist Matt Brock. "Call me old-fashioned, but I have a hard time equating those sorts of tactics with a champion who relies on his technical abilities. I can live with the five-minute ring entrances—Buddy Rogers would've done it, too, if he had theme music—but some of the other things Triple-H does are too over-the-top for my tastes."

Another change that may be helpful in building the legacy of Triple-H's current title reign: defending the title in traditional one-fall, 60-minute matches. Through the years, Triple-H has been involved in numerous gimmick matches (think triple-threat, "Elimination Chamber," and four-way matches where the belt changes hands without the champ being involved in the decisive pin or submission).

Gimmick matches have always had their place in wrestling, even when world titles were up for grabs. For instance, some of Bob Backlund's most notable title defenses took place in steel-cage bouts, and Flair's legendary second NWA World title reign commenced with a cage match win over Race at the first Starrcade. But non-traditional matches have become such a big part of the current championship landscape, especially at pay-per-views, that a traditional match would invoke an era in which championship wrestlers—the Dory Funks and Verne Gagnes—built their legacies primarily on their wrestling skills. By showcasing his athleticism more often, Triple-H would at least invite a more serious comparison to history's greatest superstars.

Throughout many of his previous title runs, Triple-H has sought to make something old seem new again. His current reign presents the perfect opportunity to be remembered as the same sort of fighting champion *his* heroes were. The 12th reign could be the best one ever ... or just another rotation on the world championship merry-go-round that dominates sports-entertainment in the modern era. ☐

Triple-H measures himself not only against world champions of bygone eras, but also against contemporaries such as The Rock. Despite Rock's success away from wrestling, Triple-H has become "the gold standard" in the wrestling business.

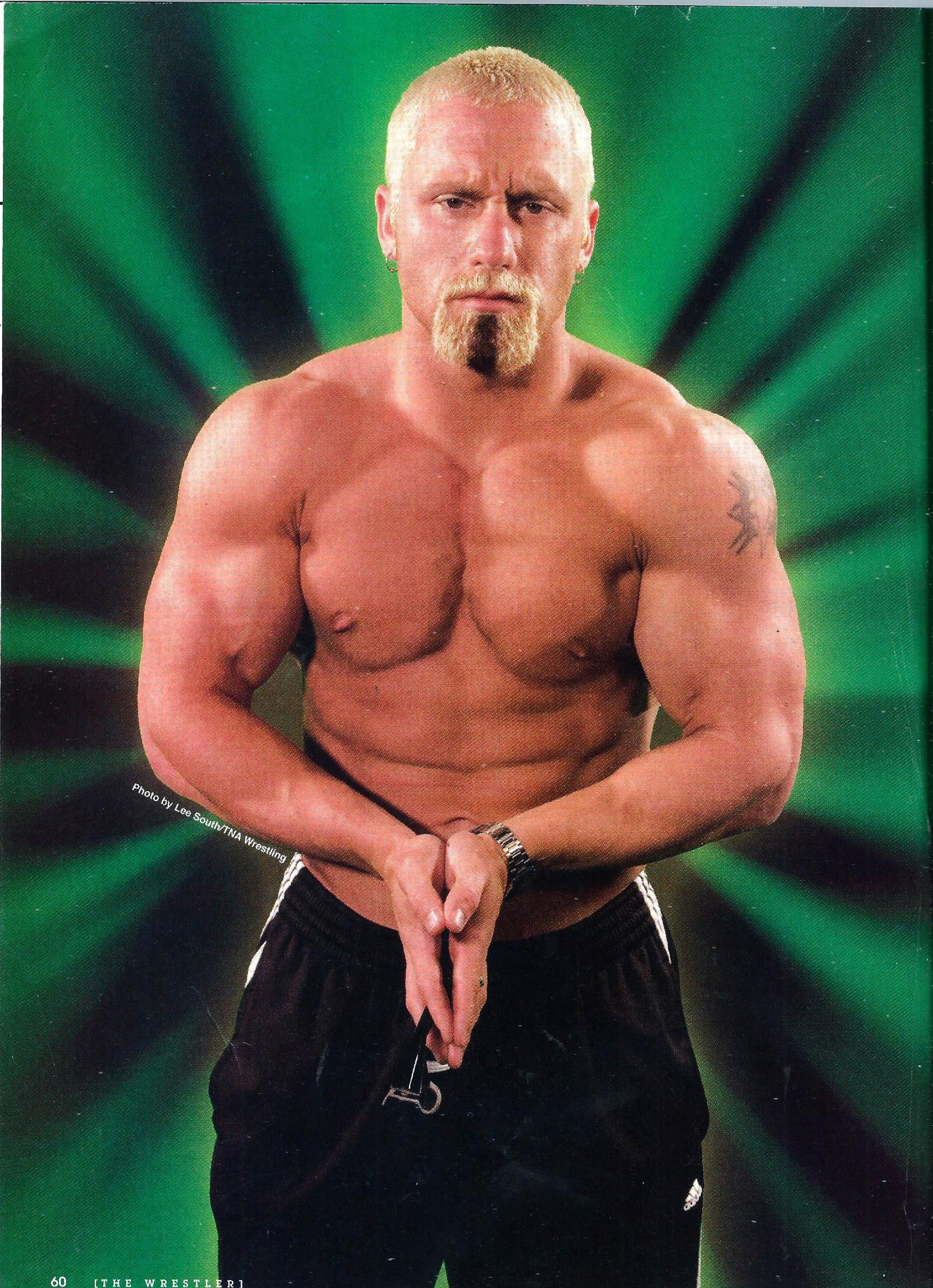


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

OUR MESSAGE TO PETEY WILLIAMS:

You Don't Have to Put Up with Steiner Anymore

Petey Williams considers Scott Steiner to be his mentor, and credits him for helping turn his career around. But if Williams ever wants to regain his self-respect, he's going to have to stand up to "Big Poppa Pump"

BY DAN MURPHY

THOUGH IT'S UNLIKELY he'd ever admit it, even Petey Williams must have thought it was a wacky plan.

Over the past few years, Williams had established himself as one of the finest X division competitors in TNA. But in a division filled with flashy, high-flying athletes, Williams was bland by comparison. His wrestling style was generally conservative and

Photo by George Tahinos

"Maple Leaf Muscle" was Williams' repackaged persona. It helped put Petey on par with the other flashy competitors in TNA's X division, and it made Scott Steiner take notice as well. With Steiner's help, Williams has taken control of the X division, even taking the division title.

mat-based. His interviews were vanilla and unmemorable. The only sizzle he had was his breathtaking Canadian destroyer flipping piledriver.

Williams recognized he was falling into a rut after Jim Cornette disbanded Team Canada in 2006. A run as a fan favorite did little to advance his career, so Williams hit the gym with renewed determination. He built up his already impressive, if compact, physique and re-christened himself "Maple Leaf Muscle."

After seeing the success Jay Lethal and Sonjay Dutt had enjoyed after developing campy personalities, Williams decided to follow suit. Mix in some resistance training bands as props

Petey Williams' ring skills have always been effective, but his ring style has been only mildly impressive mainly because of his mat-based techniques. Petey has made some changes of late to juice up his style ... and those changes were applied to more than just his ring game.

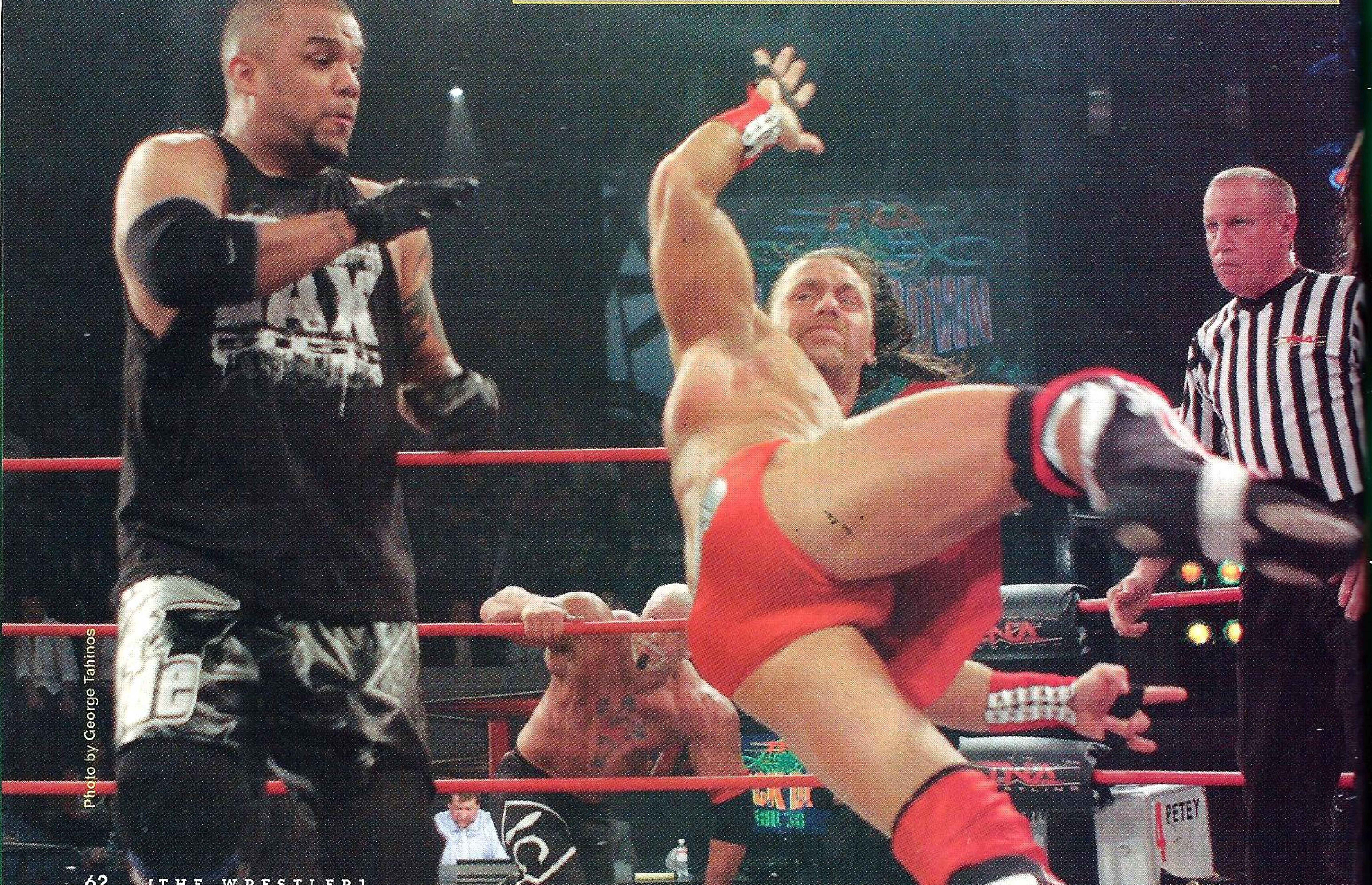


Photo by George Tahinos

and a cheesy Arnold Schwarzenegger impression, and now Petey's got a little personality. He no longer looks out of place around Curry Man, Shark Boy, "Black Machismo", and the rest of the X division performers.

The transformation into "Maple Leaf Muscle" made sense. But who could have predicted becoming "Little Petey Pump" would have worked out? "Little Petey Pump"? Could there possibly be a more emasculating nickname?

Perhaps not, but Williams knew that Steiner could deliver him the X division title, and the new persona was going to get him plenty of notice (the evidence of that is this feature story). Williams might very well have a long-range plan that will push him right to the top, trampling the very man who has done little else but bring him humiliation these past few months.

"IF I WAS IN PETEY'S SHOES ..."

BY KIP JAMES

I guess the editors of this magazine now think of me as an expert in getting rid of dead weight, so they asked me to give my opinion on what I think Petey Williams should do about Scott Steiner.

Now, I'm not giving anyone any advice here. I've got no problem with Scotty Steiner, and Petey seems like a nice enough kid. I don't want to get any heat for sticking my nose where it doesn't belong—let me say that right up front.

But there are times in every man's life when he's got to stand up for himself. I understand why Steiner gave Petey a little bit of a hazing. He was testing the kid's toughness, and Petey passed the test. But for a team to be able to function, there needs to be a certain level of respect. I don't think Scotty gave any respect to Petey, and I think Petey probably resents that. How are they going to co-exist if Steiner lacks respect and Williams has hostilities like that?

Again, I'm not telling anyone what they ought to do, but here's how I'd handle that situation.

There's two ways for Petey to get Steiner's attention—the direct way and the indirect way. The direct way would be for him to look Steiner in the face, tell him he's sick of being pushed around, and punch Steiner in the mouth. Let the chips fall from there. But Petey's got to be big enough to accept the consequences.

But there's really no need to do something that drastic, in my opinion. Since he started hanging with Steiner, Petey's career has taken off. Why ruin a good thing? I would go the indirect route. He should tell Scotty he wants a match against his big brother, Rick. Butter Scotty up about it—tell him he wants to test himself against a legend like Rick Steiner.

Once that match begins, Williams has to give Rick the beating of his life. He's got to outwrestle him, he's got to outfight him, and he's got to hit him with two or three of those Canadian destroyer piledrivers of his. That'll send a clear message to Scott, and that will earn him some respect without ending their partnership.

And if he wants to save a Canadian destroyer or two for B.G. James, well that's fine with me.

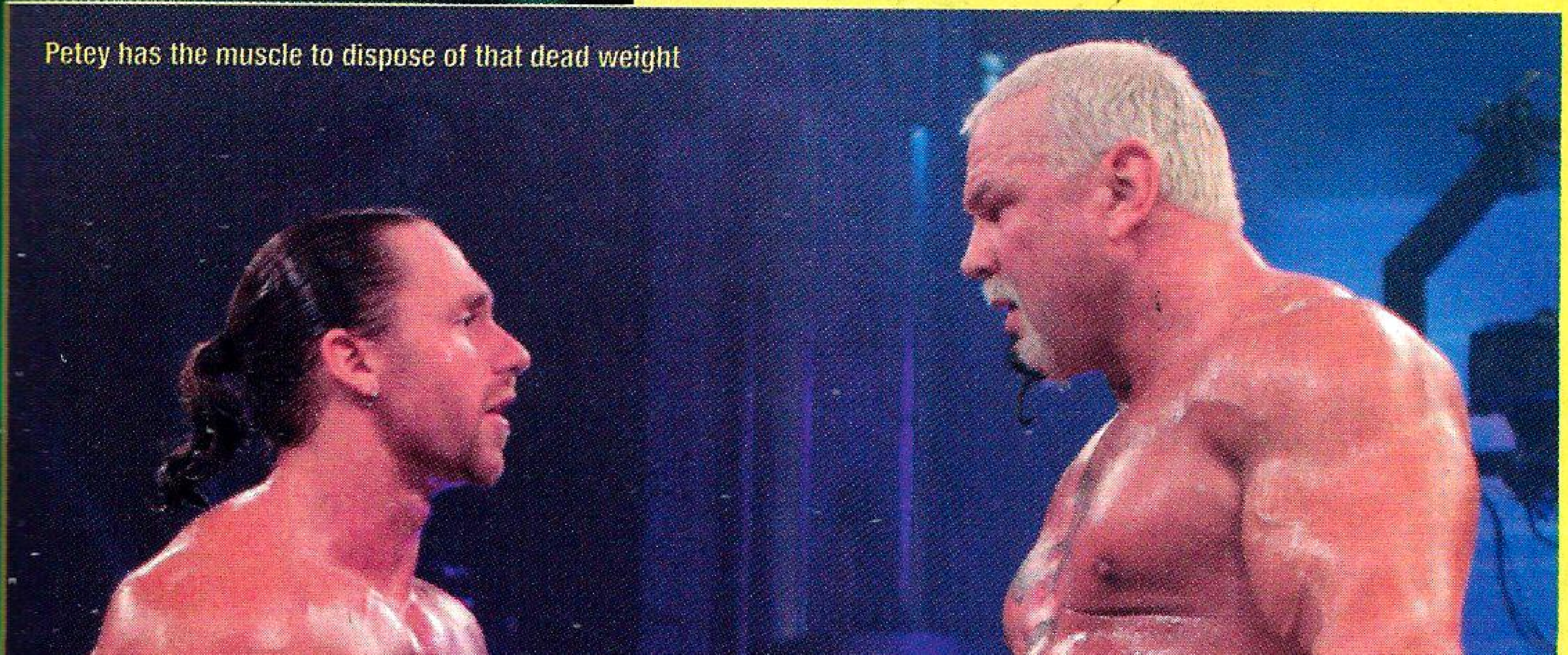
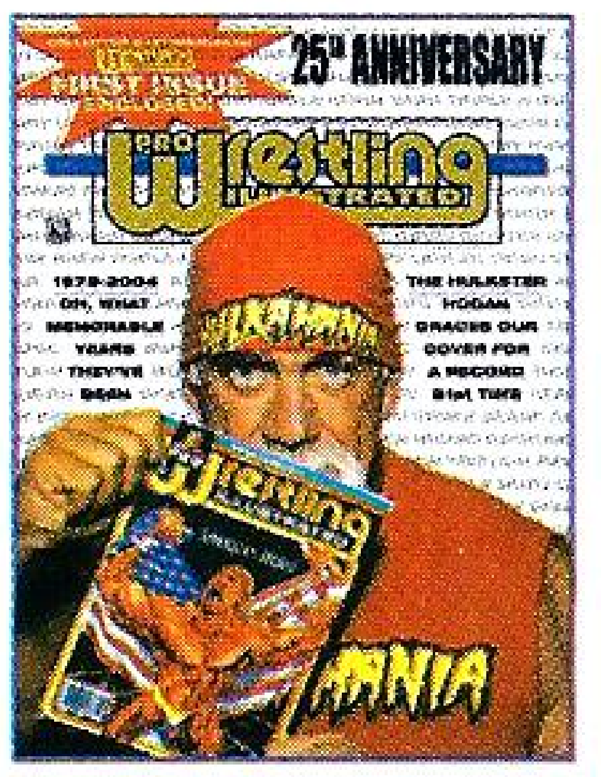
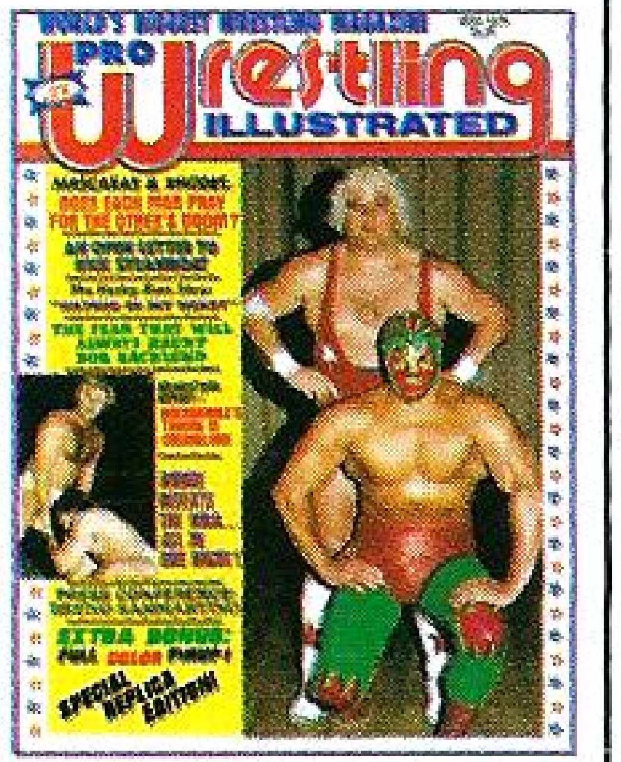

Petey has the muscle to dispose of that dead weight

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

PWI TURNS 25!

PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED

Pro Wrestling Illustrated recently celebrated its 25th year as the sport's number-one publication in a very special way. Those who subscribe to *PWI* or spotted it at the newsstand in time got a treat. Not only did PWI produce a silver anniversary special, but as an added bonus, we poly-bagged a re-print of our very first issue, from 1979!

If you missed it, you won't have to wait 25 more years for a follow-up. A limited amount of both issues are still available!

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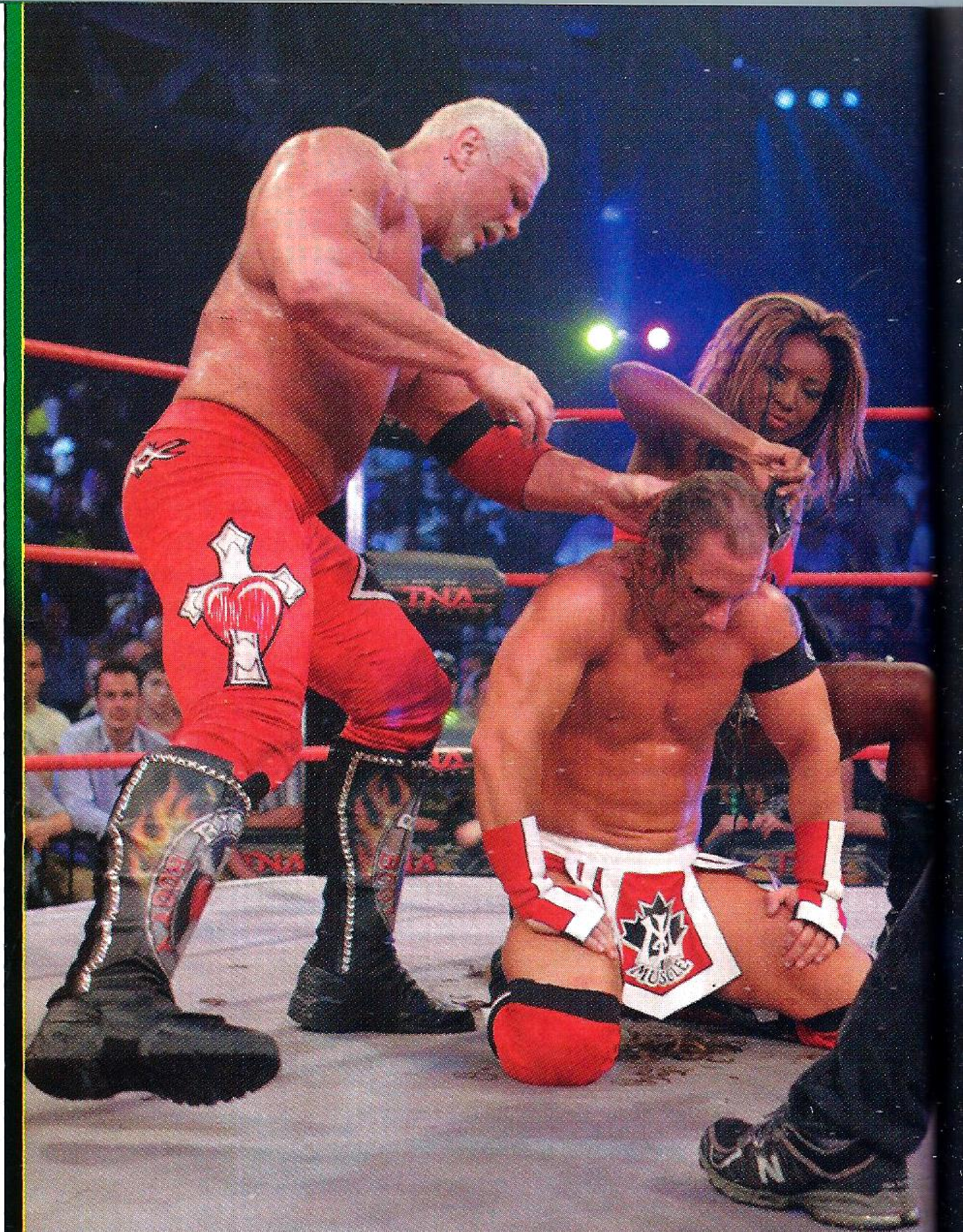


Scott Steiner may have helped Petey Williams reach new heights in the X division, but his mentorship has become more of a tyranny. Steiner often tortured Williams, even forcing him to shave his long locks (above). After that form of indoctrination, Steiner and Williams' physical traits became disturbingly similar (opposite page). Petey no longer needs a mentor ... much less one like "Big Poppa Pump."

THE MOTIVE

At Turning Point 2007, Steiner won one of four briefcases in the "Feast Or Fired" match. Williams, B.G. James, and Christopher Daniels also won briefcases. When it was revealed Daniels was stuck with the unlucky case that contained a pink slip and that James had the tag title shot he wanted, it became apparent Steiner and Williams had the singles title shots. But who had the World title shot and who had the X division shot?

Williams gambled. He agreed to face Steiner at Against All Odds 2007 with both cases at stake. Had he won, Williams could finally have broken through the glass ceiling and had a match for the World title, with a guaranteed X division title shot as a fallback. Unfortunately, he didn't count on Rhaka Khan, whose interference helped Steiner win the match.

Williams had come infuriatingly close to title contention, only to get robbed. At risk of falling back down the ladder of contention, Williams tried a new gambit. He sucked up to Steiner. He said he wanted Steiner to become his mentor.

Steiner realized Williams could be a vital ally in helping him wrest the World title away from either Kurt Angle or Samoa Joe, so he considered the offer. Over the following weeks, Steiner hazed

MUSCLE
TNAWRE
TNAWRE

Photos by George Tahinos

Williams to test his loyalty. Williams endured Steiner's torture tactics. He was nearly drowned in a fish tank, shocked with a car battery, zapped with a taser, forced to hold on to the hood of a moving car for dear life, and had his head shaved.

Through all that pain and humiliation, Williams clung to a couple of inspirational thoughts: Steiner held the key to a championship. Steiner had made a career out of bullying people—including Williams' true mentor, Scott D'Amore, during his early days in WCW—and was due for his comeuppance.

STEP 1: WIN STEINER'S TRUST

Mission accomplished. Steiner knighted Williams with his own chain mail headgear, officially making Williams one of his "freaks." As a show of that newly found respect, Steiner presented Williams with the X division title shot.

Considering Steiner had no interest in contending for that title, it was an empty gesture. But for Williams, it wasn't an opportunity he was going to let pass.

STEP 2: WIN THE X DIVISION TITLE

Williams took a page out of Edge's playbook when he choose to "cash in" his title shot after Lethal was exhausted following a hard-fought win over Johnny Devine. Williams quickly hit the destroyer and won the championship, a title that had eluded him since January 2005. The association with Steiner had born fruit.

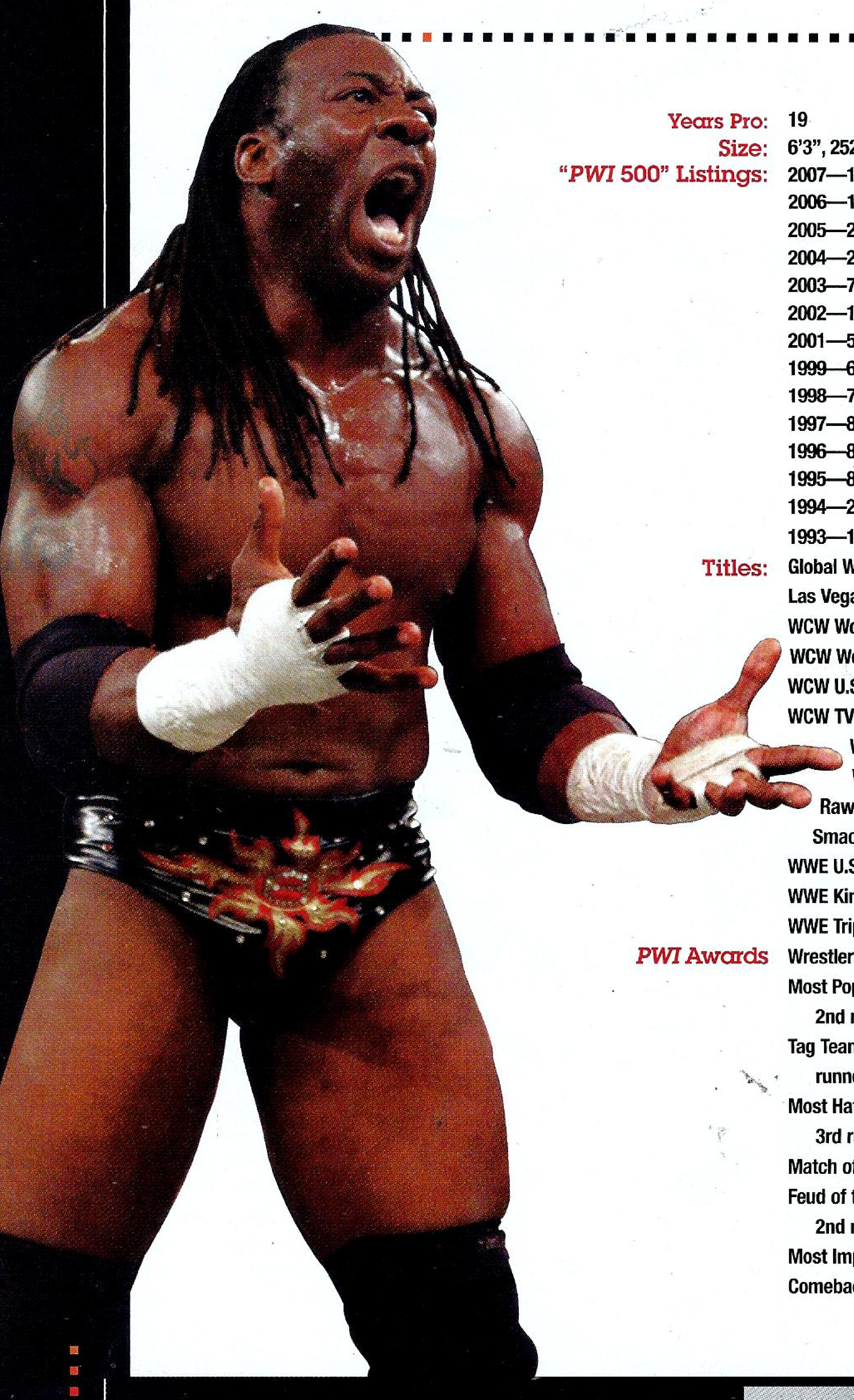
STEP 3: MAKE STEINER PAY

Williams got what he was after. He had broken out of his rut and regained a championship. While he'd still be considered a dark horse contender for the TNA World title, he would at least have to be considered a potential challenger, which he hasn't been for years. Williams has momentum.

But what good is momentum if Williams is going to be "Little Petey Pump"—Steiner's hapless sidekick? Williams knows he hasn't worked this hard to be Steiner's wingman. The fact that Williams suffered a broken orbital bone in an April match against Jimmy Rave might prove to be a blessing. With ample time to finalize his plans, Step 4 should be very interesting indeed. ☐

THE WRESTLING ANALYST

BOOKER T



Years Pro:	19
Size:	6'3", 252
"*PWI 500*" Listings:	2007—18 2006—19 2005—20 2004—24 2003—7 2002—14 2001—5 1999—60 1998—7 1997—84 1996—86 1995—89 1994—260 1993—182
Titles:	Global Wrestling Federation tag team (three times) Las Vegas Pro Wrestling WCW World tag team (10 times) WCW World (five times) WCW U.S. WCW TV (six times) WWE Intercontinental WWF Hardcore (two times) Raw World tag team (three times) Smackdown World WWE U.S. (three times) WWE King of the Ring 2006 WWE Triple Crown
PWI Awards	Wrestler of the Year, 2nd runner-up (2000) Most Popular Wrestler of the Year, 2nd runner-up (2002) Tag Team of the Year, winner (1995 and 1996), 2nd runner-up (1999), 1st runner-up (2002) Most Hated Wrestler of the Year, 1st runner-up (2001), 3rd runner-up (2006) Match of the Year, 2nd runner-up (1995) Feud of the Year, 1st runner-up (1995), 2nd runner-up(2000), 1st runner-up (2001) Most Improved Wrestler of the Year, winner (1998) Comeback of the Year, 2nd runner-up (2001)

[THE NUMBERS]

Offense (8.5): Booker T has numerous ways to hurt you, but often only one or two will do the trick. He's a strategic ring general and a ruthless opportunist. Despite his chiseled musculature and imposing size, he can strike with his devastating scissorskick with split-second reflexes. His hefty list of championships is proof enough that Booker T has an unrelenting will to win, and the bravado to do what it takes to secure victory, even if (or especially if) it requires some less-than-fair play.

Defense (9.0): If there's one thing Booker loves more than winning, it's not losing. He can't stand failure, so he stops at nothing to ensure that doesn't happen, which means he'll thwart any attempts by his opponents to gain ground: He'll roll out of the ring for a breather, sneak in a low blow, or gladly accept some outside help. But that doesn't mean he can't fend for himself. You don't win as many championships as Booker T without learning the fine art of self-preservation. There's nary a hold Booker T can't break, nor an attack he can't deflect. He's like a chess master, always looking several moves ahead.

Experience (10.0): Booker is about to complete his second full decade in professional wrestling, a feat unto itself in a business fraught with injuries, burnout, and fickle fans. Booker was the most decorated wrestler in WCW history, earning a whopping 26 titles before beginning his career in WWE, which was arguably even more successful in terms of performance and match quality. He is a WWE Triple Crown champion, having held the Smackdown World, Intercontinental, and World tag team titles. His straightforward grappling style evokes the great champions of yesteryear, while exhibiting the high-thrills work ethic of his younger contemporaries. The students at his wrestling school in Houston, Texas, are lucky to be learning their craft from one of the most accomplished performers of all-time.

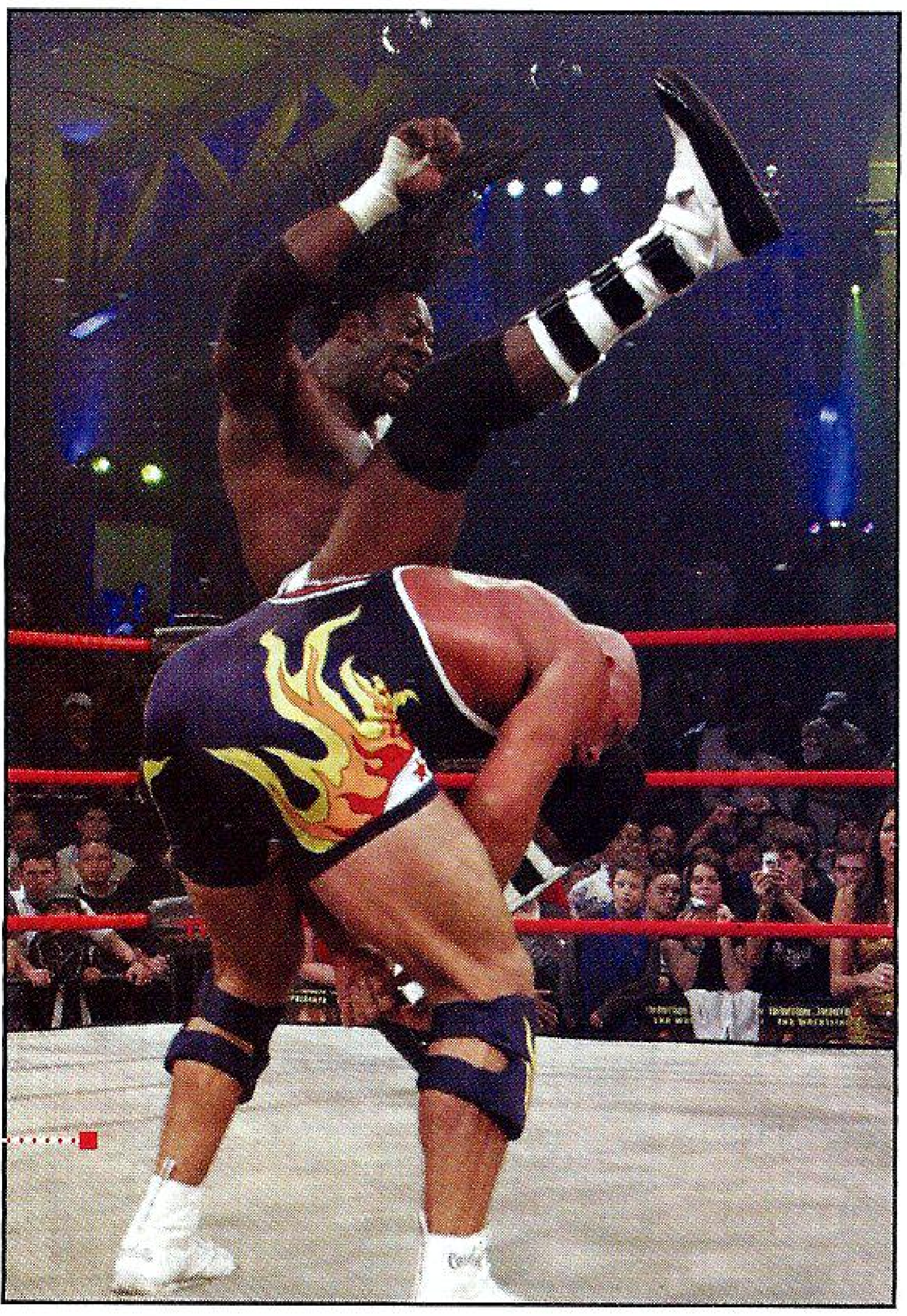
Conditioning (8.0): There was a time when Booker would have scored a 9.5 in this category, but the fact is, he has been in the game nearly 20 years and the rigors of the ring are taking their toll. He has documented back and knee problems, which, despite his courageous will to continue competing, have slowed him a step or two. Even so, he is a remarkable physical specimen, able to work at any pace and never seems sapped of energy.

Science (9.0): Though Booker may not boast the flashiest arsenal (spinarooni aside), he is a consummate technician. He doesn't need flash. Just watch a video of him at work in any given match and marvel at his combination of fluidity, strategy, power, and pacing. The man knows how to work over an opponent—and work a crowd—to maximum effect.

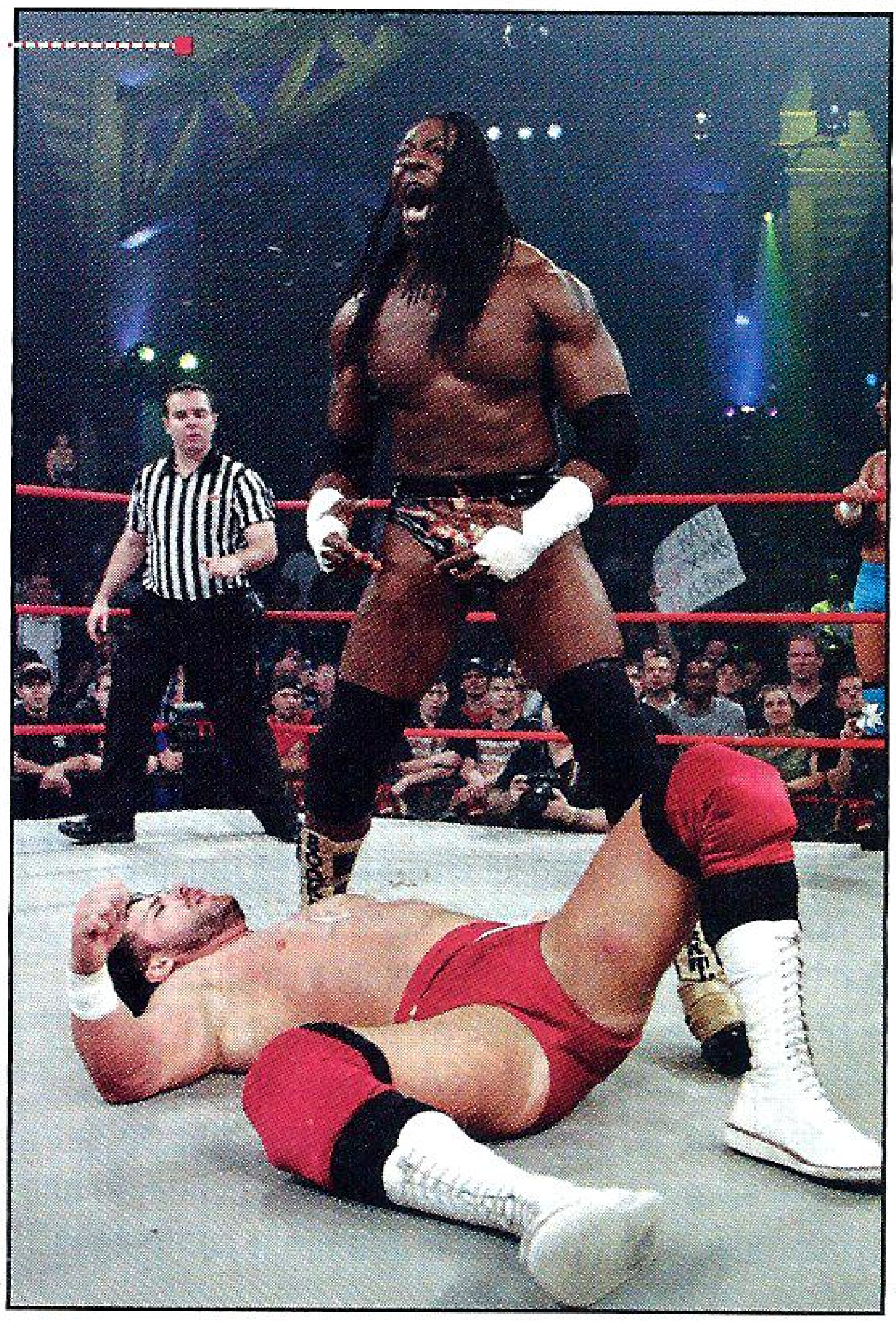
Power (8.5): In a world of giants, Booker can hold his own. He's not the tallest, nor the heaviest, nor the strongest, but he has a winning combination of all three: above-average height, weight, and strength. At 6'3" and 252 pounds, he can confidently go toe to toe with any man. His typical strategy does not rely solely on power moves, which makes them all the more devastating when he does opt to unleash them.

Speed (7.5): Booker T is a deliberate, calculating ring warrior, not a "quicker than a hiccup" high-flyer. When he connects with the scissorskick, it's deadly, but when he misses, it often takes him a split-second too long to regain his bearings, leaving him vulnerable to speedy opponents. A wise opponent would try to outpace Booker T, since he's tough to beat in a grapple or slugfest.

Quality Of Opposition (10.0): Nobody wins more than two-dozen championships without having faced and beaten the best. Name any top wrestler from the past 15 years; Booker has probably wrestled (and likely beaten) him. He did, however, lose a title once to Vince Russo, but we won't go into that.

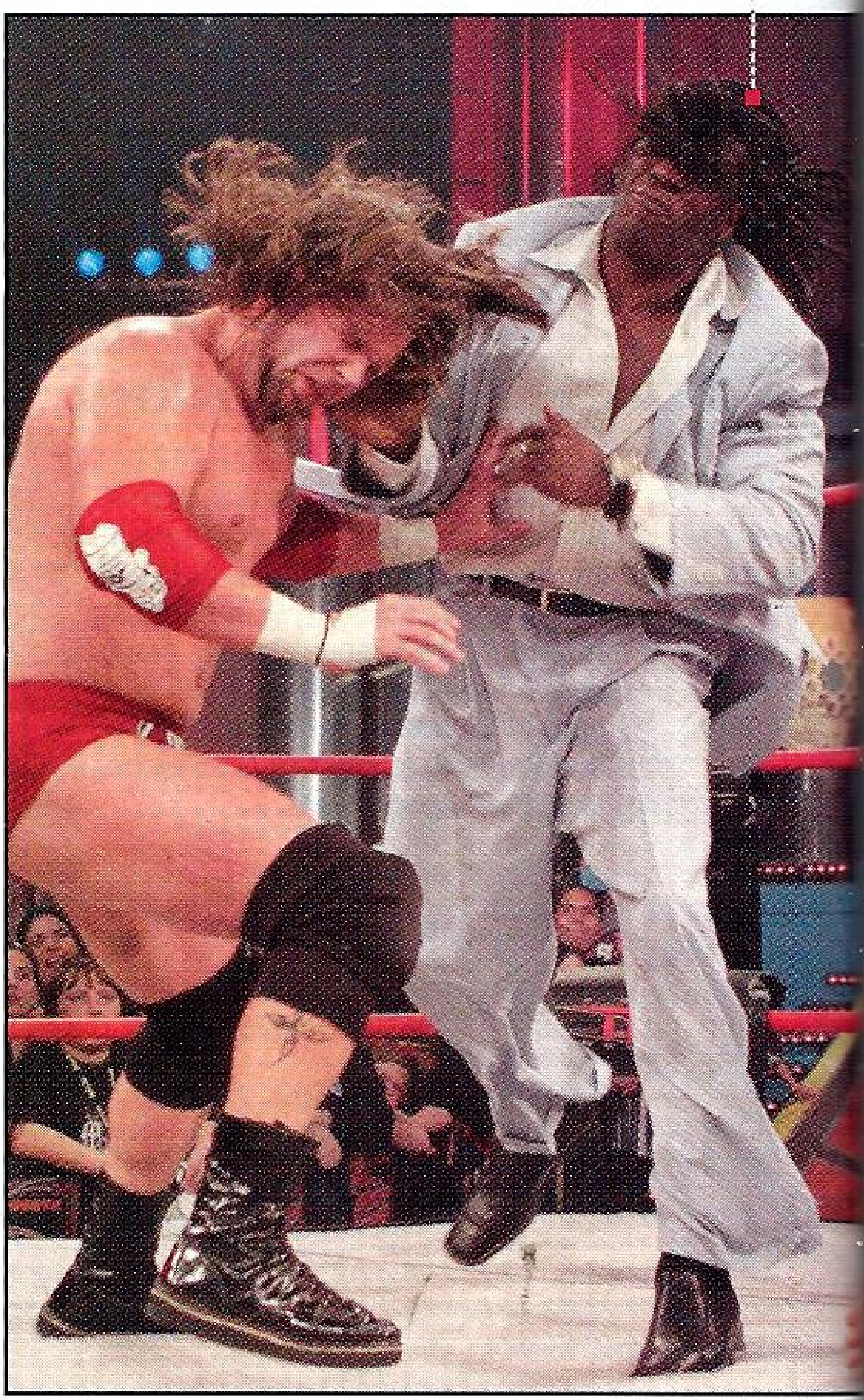


① **When it connects, Booker T's scissorskick is one of his best offensive strikes, even taking down a great like Kurt Angle. But when he misses the move, Booker leaves himself open for quicker opponents to take control.**



② For Book, winning is essential, even if it's done by interference or the ever-handy steel chair (above). But just because he is quick to resort to unfair tactics doesn't mean Booker can't handle himself fairly. Booker can dispose of his opponents legitimately. He is always one step ahead of someone like Robert Roode (right).

③ **Sometimes Booker's hot head gets him into trouble. He is easy to mess with psychologically, which is why he's had trouble with Roode. Booker doesn't always make wise decisions when he lets his temper flare up.**



Booker's career has spanned the top promotions in wrestling history. TNA is the perfect work environment for him at this stage of his career. He is not only one of the company's biggest names, but he is a great teacher for young stars like James Storm … a man who could use some good schooling now and again. ④

[THE ANALYSIS]

Repertoire: Booker T has rarely put much stock in what the fans think of him, so he tends not to use moves that are deliberately crowd-pleasing (the notable exception being, of course, the charmingly ridiculous spinarooni). His arsenal is a technically sound combination of mat fundamentals, high-impact strikes, psychological warfare, and the occasional ref-isn't-looking opportunism. The scissorskick is a concussive and highly effective finisher, as is the Book-end. His long arms and legs make his clotheslines and crescent kicks among the most feared in the industry.

Strengths: Few active competitors know wrestling as intimately and thoroughly as Booker T. He goes to the ring with a plan and does everything he can to execute it. When situations change, he adapts. He doesn't distinguish clean victories from dirty ones—winning is winning, end of story. His ego is so huge it should barely fit inside arenas, but it is a well-earned ego. All hail? Why not?

Weaknesses: Though he tries to seem aloof, Booker can sometimes get flustered when he feels the fans or wrestlers aren't paying him his due respect. When he gets flustered, he makes mistakes. Though injuries have slowed him in the past, he has shown remarkable resilience. Sometimes his ego gets in the way of common sense, causing him to pick battles that would best be left unsought.

Defining Career Moment: Though he was the five-time (go ahead, repeat that four more times—you know you want to) WCW World heavyweight champion, it was his first reign, beginning with a victory over Jeff Jarrett in 2000, that truly put him in the pantheon of modern wrestling stars. It was not his longest championship run, nor his best remembered, but it truly elevated him to the level of top-tier singles star—a position he has maintained consistently ever since.

Future: TNA is the right place for Booker at this stage in his career. He has ascended to the top of both major wrestling promotions of the modern era, so it only makes sense that he set his sights on a third. TNA's less rigorous touring schedule allows him to remain in peak condition and showcase the skills that made him a star. It's uncertain how long Booker will remain a competitor, but judging by the caliber of his work in TNA, he has plenty of fight left in him. □

OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

1 **SAMOA JOE**
290, Samoa
(2) TNA World champion

2 **TRIPLE-H**
269, Greenwich, CT
(8) Raw World champion

3 **THE UNDERTAKER**
304, Dallas, TX
(1) No. 1 contender, SD World title

4 **RANDY ORTON**
245, St. Louis, MO
(3) No. 1 contender, Raw World title

5 **EDGE**
240, Toronto, Ontario
(–) No. 2 contender, SD World title

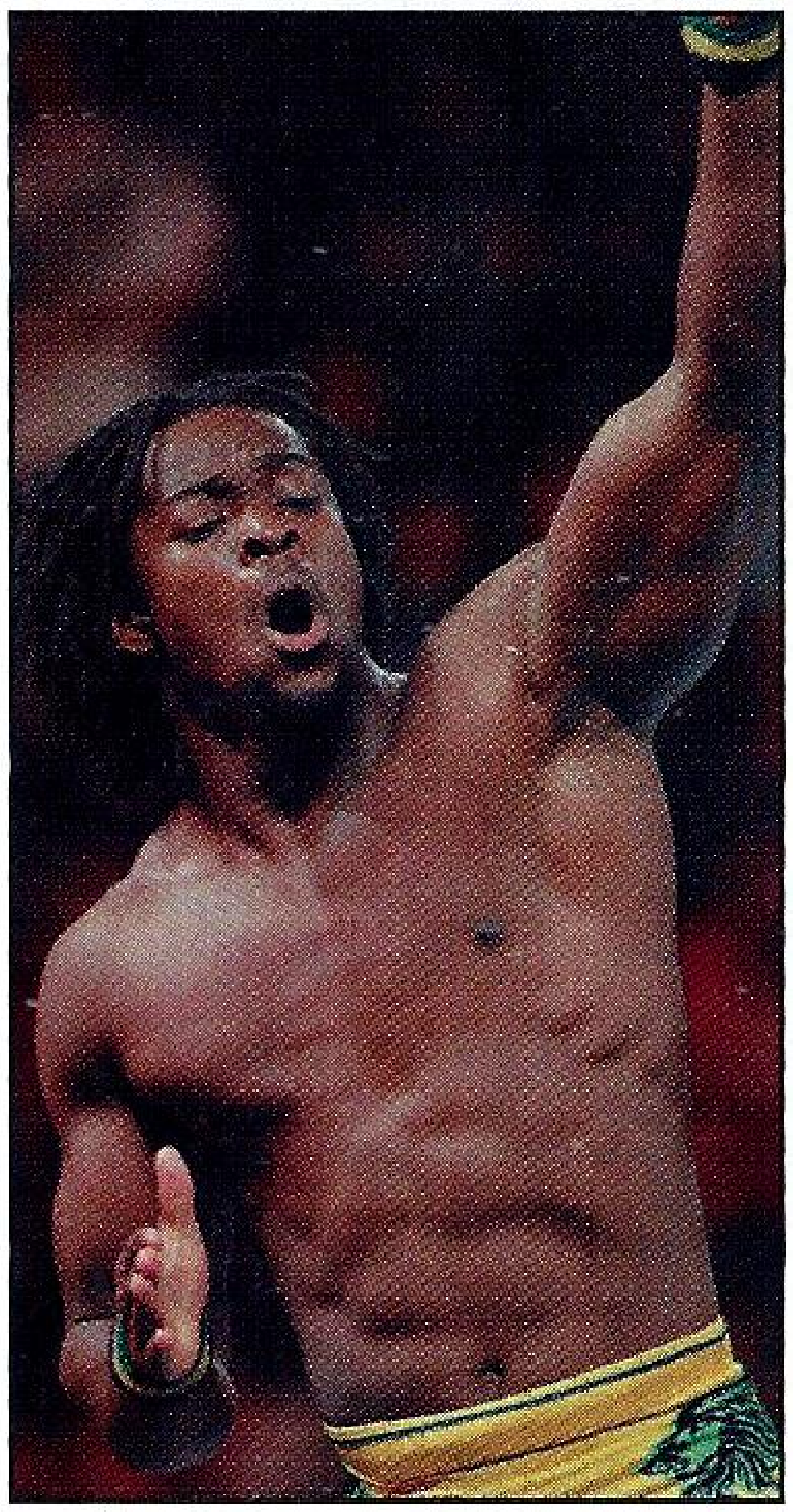
6 **KURT ANGLE**
233, Pittsburgh, PA
(4) No. 1 contender, TNA World title

7 **NIGEL McGUINNESS**
220, London, England
(5) Ring of Honor champion

8 **KOHEI SUWAMA**
260, Fujisawa, Japan
(–) All Japan Triple Crown champion

9 **JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD**
309, Roscoe, TX
(9) No. 2 contender: Raw World title

10 **KEIJI MUTO**
248, Yamanishi, Japan
(–) IWGP champion



Kofi Kingston

TAG TEAMS

1 **HARDCORE HOLLY & CODY RHODES**
Combined weight: 467 pounds
(1) Raw World tag team champions

2 **JOHN MORRISON & THE MIZ**
Combined weight: 414 pounds
(2) Smackdown World tag team champions

3 **HOMICIDE & HERNANDEZ**
Combined weight: 515 pounds
(–) TNA World tag team champions

4 **BRIAN KENDRICK & PAUL LONDON**
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders, Raw tag team title

5 **TOGI MAKABE & TORU YANO**
Combined weight: 488 pounds
(4) IWGP tag team champions

6 **TEAM 3D**
Combined weight: 579 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders: TNA World tag team title

7 **DREW McINTYRE & STU SANDERS**
Combined weight: 510 pounds
(–) FCW tag team champions

8 **PHOENIX STAR & ZOKRE**
Combined weight: 328 pounds
(2) NWA tag team champions

9 **ERIC PEREZ & EDDIE COLON**
Combined weight: 456 pounds
(9) No. 1 contenders, FCW tag team title

10 **JIMMY JACOBS & TYLER BLACK**
Combined Weight: 379 pounds
(–) No. 1 contenders, ROH tag team title

WWE RAW

World Champion:
TRIPLE-H
(2) 269, Greenwich, CT

1—**RANDY ORTON** *(C) 245, St. Louis, MO*
2—**JOHN B. LAYFIELD** *(2) 309, Roscoe, TX*
3—**JOHN CENA** *(3) 260, West Newbury, MA*
4—**CHRIS JERICHO** *(4) 220, Winnipeg, Manitoba*
5—**SHAWN MICHAELS** *(5) 217, San Antonio, TX*
6—**KEN KENNEDY** *(6) 246, Green Bay, WI*
7—**JEFF HARDY** *(–) 212, Cameron, NC*
8—**UMAGA** *(7) 348, Samoa*
9—**CARLITO** *(8) 220, San Juan, Puerto Rico*
10—**SNITSKY** *(–) 310, Nesquehoning, PA*

WWE SMACKDOWN

World Champion:
VACANT

1—**THE UNDERTAKER** *(C) 304, Dallas, TX*
2—**EDGE** *(2) 240, Toronto, Ontario*
3—**BATISTA** *(1) 318, Washington, DC*
4—**MATT HARDY** *(–) 213, Cameron, NC*
5—**MVP** *(3) 252, Miami, FL*
6—**MARK HENRY** *(5) 380, Silsbee, TX*
7—**FINLAY** *(10) 230, Belfast, Ireland*
8—**C.M. PUNK** *(–) 210, Chicago, IL*
9—**VLADIMIR KOZLOV** *(–) 310, Moscow, Russia*
10—**NUNZIO** *(–) 209, Rockland County, NY*

ECW

Champion:
KANE
(–) 326, St. Louis, MO

1—**C.M. PUNK** *(1) 210, Chicago, IL*
2—**CHAVO GUERRERO JR.** *(2) 210, El Paso, TX*
3—**THE MIZ** *(3) 210, Parma, OH*
4—**KOFI KINGSTON** *(4) 225, Jamaica*
5—**THE BIG SHOW** *(5) 485, Aiken, SC*
6—**SHELTON BENJAMIN** *(6) 245, Minneapolis, MN*
7—**MIKE KNOX** *(7) 260, Amarillo, TX*
8—**JOHN MORRISON** *(8) 204, Hanover, WV*
9—**TOMMY DREAMER** *(9) 260, Yonkers, NY*
10—**STEVIE RICHARDS** *(10) 225, Philadelphia, PA*

TNA

World Champion:
SAMOA JOE
(C) 290, Samoa

1—**SCOTT STEINER** *(–) 260, Detroit, MI*
2—**PETEY WILLIAMS** *(2) 179, Windsor, Ontario*
3—**KURT ANGLE** *(1) 233, Pittsburgh, PA*
4—**KAZ** *(8) 215, Yucca Valley, CA*
5—**BOOKER T** *(10) 250, Houston, TX*
6—**ROBERT ROODE** *(–) 232, Toronto, Ontario*
7—**MATT MORGAN** *(–) 330, Fairfield, CT*
8—**A.J. STYLES** *(9) 202, Gainesville, GA*
9—**ERIC YOUNG** *(4) 225, Vancouver, B.C.*
10—**TRAVIS TOMKO** *(5) 292, Tombstone, AZ*

Top 10 and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (–) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

[FOR PERIOD ENDED MAY 28, 2008]

3rd DEGREE WRESTLING: Champion—Shane Rawls; **1**—Les Mayne; **2**—Jerry Bostic; **3**—Eric Rose; **4**—Thomas Trump; **5**—D. Money, **6**—Ky-Ote; **7**—Montego Seeka; **8**—Thug Nasty; **9**—Dane Griffin; **10**—Michael Faith.

COMPOUND PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Romero Contreras; **1**—Tim Rockwell; **2**—Shane Morbid; **3**—Canadian Red Devil; **4**—Sudden Impact 1; **5**—El Super Colibri; **6**—Anthony Jackson; **7**—Canadian Luchadore; **8**—Sudden Impact 2; **9**—Cold-Blooded Chris; **10**—Justin Lee.

INDIE PRO ENTERTAINMENT: Champion—Vacant; **1**—Hyjinx; **2**—Gutterboy; **3**—Leslie Leatherman; **4**—Jake Davis; **5**—OGB; **6**—John Balsamo; **7**—Fumar; **8**—Flex Fenom; **9**—Jackpot Jimmy Jessup; **10**—Griffen.

IMPACT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—Angel Williams; **1**—Nathan Sensation; **2**—John O'Malley; **3**—Striker; **4**—Kenny Campbell; **5**—Michael Barry; **6**—John Zorthos; **7**—Jermaine Johnson; **8**—Bernie Donderwitz; **9**—Se7en; **10**—Shawn Sanders.

MARYLAND CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Christian York; **1**—Adam Flash; **2**—Corporal Punishment; **3**—Joey Matthews; **4**—Bruiser; **5**—Josh Daniels; **6**—Danny Doring; **7**—Ruckus; **8**—Devon Storm; **9**—Mahoney; **10**—Delirious.

MID-SOUTH WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Al Farat; **1**—Ky-Ote; **2**—Tyson Jaymes; **3**—Xavior; **4**—Eric Rose; **5**—Bad Boy; **6**—Se7en; **7**—Midnite Rider; **8**—Slash; **9**—Montego Seeka; **10**—3rd Rail.

NATIONAL WRESTLING LEAGUE: Champion—Todd Hill; **1**—Samu; **2**—John Rambo; **3**—The Patriot; **4**—Chris Cline; **5**—Blackhawk; **6**—Doink the Clown; **7**—Rocky Dicola; **8**—Brandon Scott; **9**—Tony Atlas; **10**—Leslie Leatherman.

NORTHEAST WRESTLING: Champion—Ron Zombie; **1**—Xavier; **2**—Samoa Joe; **3**—Booker T; **4**—Jerry Lawler; **5**—Scott Steiner; **6**—Joey Matthews; **7**—Jason Blade; **8**—Christian Cage; **9**—Jeff Starr; **10**—Kurt Adonis.

PRO WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT: Champion—Jey Graham; **1**—Shane Valentine; **2**—Kage; **3**—Johnny Graham; **4**—The Patriot; **5**—Leslie Leatherman; **6**—Bill Bain; **7**—Demolition Ax; **8**—Jackpot; **9**—Ian Jordan; **10**—Commander Samuel A. Wellington.

REVOLUTIONARY CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Tank; **1**—BoneCrusher; **2**—Deranged; **3**—Suicidal Youth; **4**—Southside Brawler; **5**—Ryan Lee; **6**—Hamhock; **7**—Hambone #1; **8**—E.Z. Ryder; **9**—Hambone #2; **10**—Crazy Train.

WEST-TEXAS WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Chad Thomas; **1**—Preston James; **2**—Dameon Blood; **3**—Brian Blade; **4**—Tony Morales; **5**—El Gringo Loco; **6**—Raul Torrez; **7**—Rage; **8**—Violent V.; **9**—Shane Garrett; **10**—Jordan Calubs.

WORLD CLASS EXTREME WRESTLING: Champion—Corey Edsel; **1**—Hangtime; **2**—Cletus Bass; **3**—K.C. McKnight; **4**—Tracy Gilbert; **5**—Bobby Wohlfert; **6**—Dillinger; **7**—Aaron Devil; **8**—Kid Evil; **9**—Shaq Knox; **10**—D.Z. Hyde

RING OF HONOR

Champion:
NIGEL McGUINNESS
(C) 220, London, England
1—CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI
(9) 232, Schaffhausen, Switzerland
2—BRYAN DANIELSON
(3) 185, Aberdeen, WA
3—KEVIN STEEN
(1) 225, Marieville, Quebec
4—ERICK STEVENS
(4) 231, Sarasota, FL
5—RODERICK STRONG
(6) 205, Tampa, FL
6—AUSTIN ARIES
(2) 202, Milwaukee, WI
7—TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(5) 297, Tokyo, Japan
8—GO SHIOZAKI
(7) 220, Tokyo, Japan
9—DAVEY RICHRDS
(8) 202, Othello, WA
10—EL GENERICO
(10) 180, Montreal, Canada

NWA

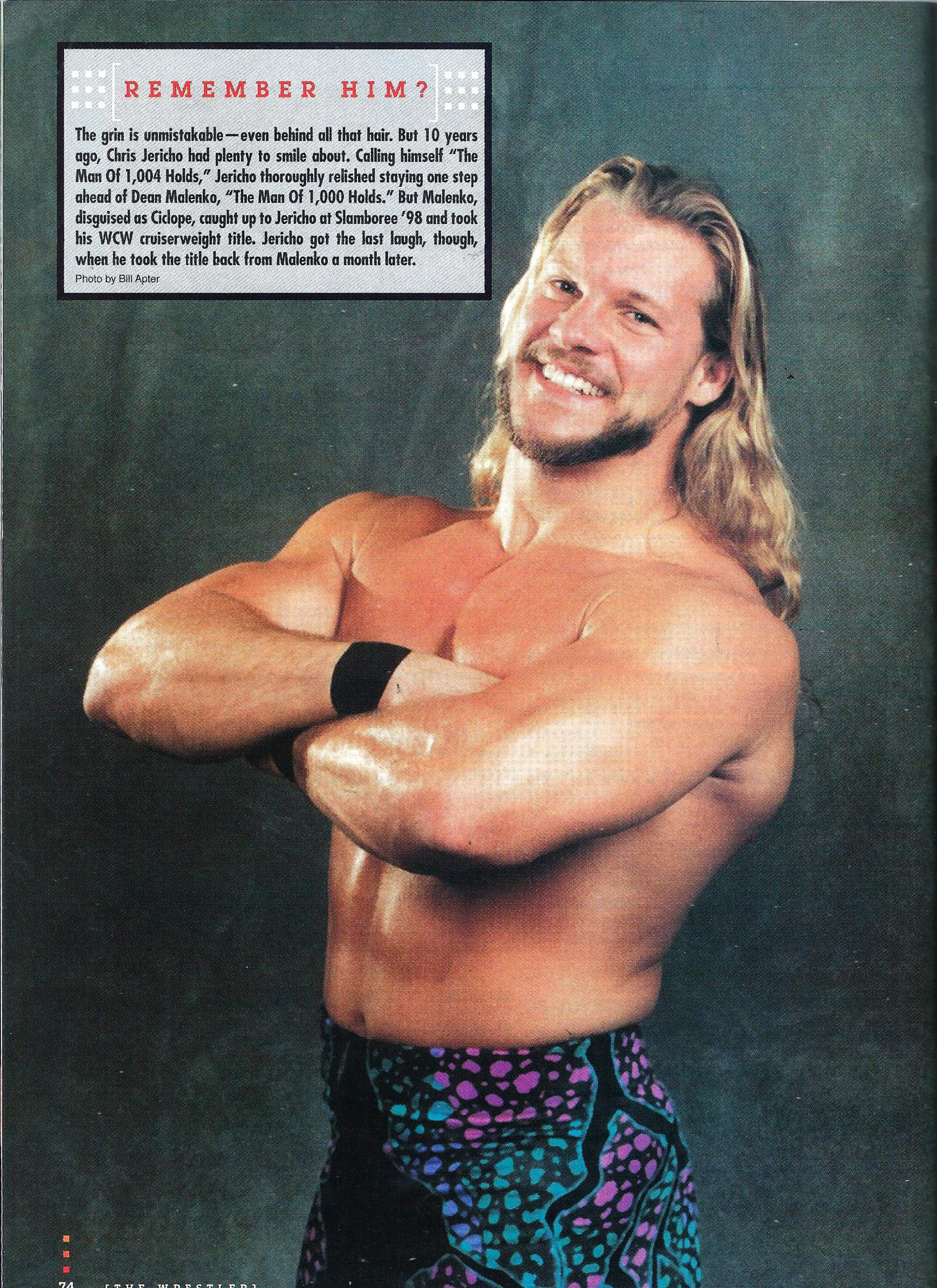
Champion:
ADAM PEARCE
(–) 248, San Diego, CA
1—BRENT ALBRIGHT
(–) 236, Tulsa, OK
2—BLUE DEMON JR.
(–) 216, Mexico City, Mexico
3—KEIJI MUTO
(–) 248, Yamanashi, Japan
4—MIKE DiBIASE
(–) 220, Amarillo, TX
5—SHINSUKE NAKAMURA
(–) 248, Mineyama, Kyoto
6—ROB CONWAY
(–) 238, New Albany, IN
7—T.J. PERKINS
(–) 210, Kansas City, MO
8—SEAN WALTMAN
(–) 236, Mexico City, Mexico
9—SID VICIOUS
(–) 318, Marion, AR
10—CRUSHER HANSON
(–) 260, Strongville, OH

JAPAN

1—KEIJI MUTO
(–) 245, Yamanishi, Japan
IWGP champion
2—KOHEI SUWAMA
(7) 260, Fujisawa, Japan
All Japan Triple Crown champion
3—TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(3) 297, Tokyo, Japan
GHC champion
4—MITSUHARU MISAWA
(6) 228, Ashikaga, Japan
5—HIROSHI TANAHASHI
(–) 227, Ogaki, Japan
6—MINORU SUZUKI
(5) 220, Yokohama, Japan
7—NAOMICHI MARUFUJI
(–) 211, Saitama, Japan
8—KENSUKE SASAKI
(2) 251, Tokyo, Japan
9—CIMA
(4) 176, Sakai City, Japan
Open the Dream Gate champion
10—YOSHINOBU KANEMARU
(–) 187, Kofu City, Japan

MEXICO

1—DOS CARAS JR.
(–) 211, San Luis Potos, Mexico
2—DR. WAGNER JR.
(10) 215, Mexico City, Mexico
3—MISTICO
(4) 177, Mexico City, Mexico
4—PERRO AGUAYO JR.
(–) 200, Zacatecas, Mexico
5—JUDAS MESIAS
(1) 245, Bayamon, Puerto Rico
6—ATLANTIS
(6) 180, Guadalajara, Mexico
7—LIZMARK JR.
(3) 262, Acapulco, Mexico
8—MEPHISTO
(–) 200, Mexico City, Mexico
9—HECTOR GARZA
(7) 220, Monterrey, Mexico
10—EL HIJO DEL SANTO
(–) 180, Tulacingo, Mexico



REMEMBER HIM?

The grin is unmistakable—even behind all that hair. But 10 years ago, Chris Jericho had plenty to smile about. Calling himself "The Man Of 1,004 Holds," Jericho thoroughly relished staying one step ahead of Dean Malenko, "The Man Of 1,000 Holds." But Malenko, disguised as Ciclope, caught up to Jericho at Slamboree '98 and took his WCW cruiserweight title. Jericho got the last laugh, though, when he took the title back from Malenko a month later.

Photo by Bill Apter

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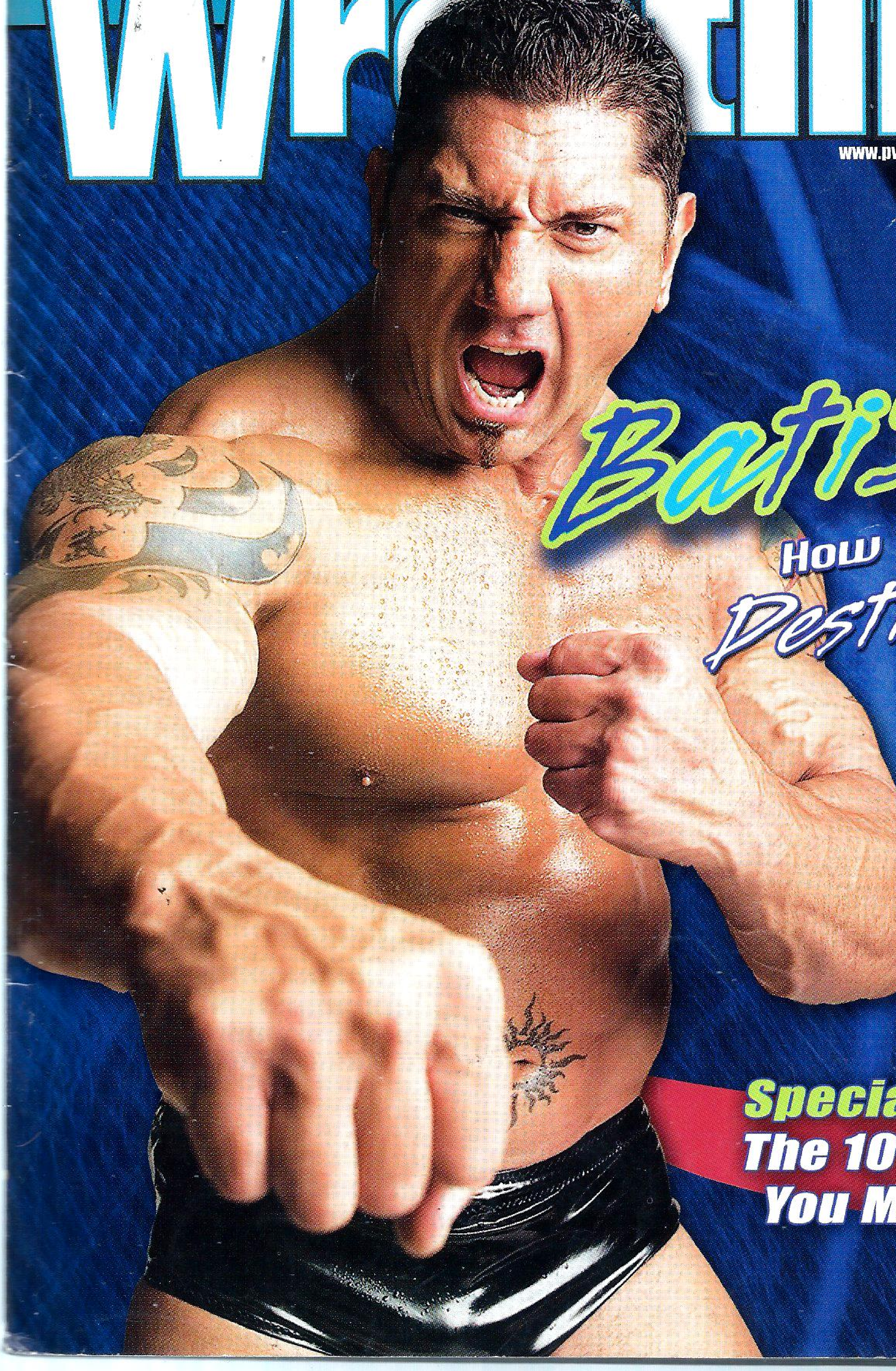


BatiSta

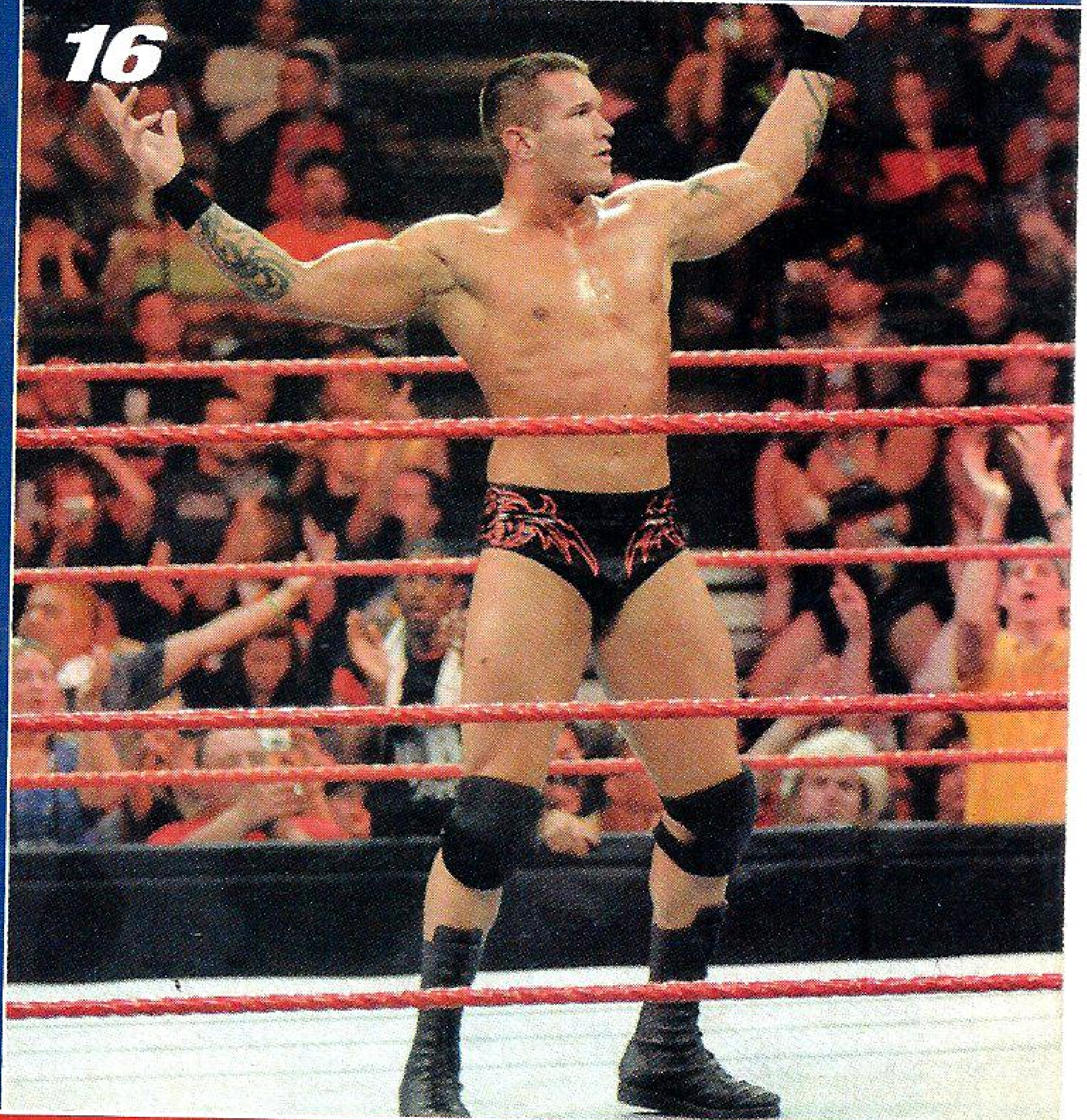
How Ric Flair Is Destroying His Career

Special Section:

The 10 ROH Stars You Must Know

inside wrestling

THE MAGAZINE THAT RIPS THE LID OFF PRO WRESTLING



16

DEPARTMENTS

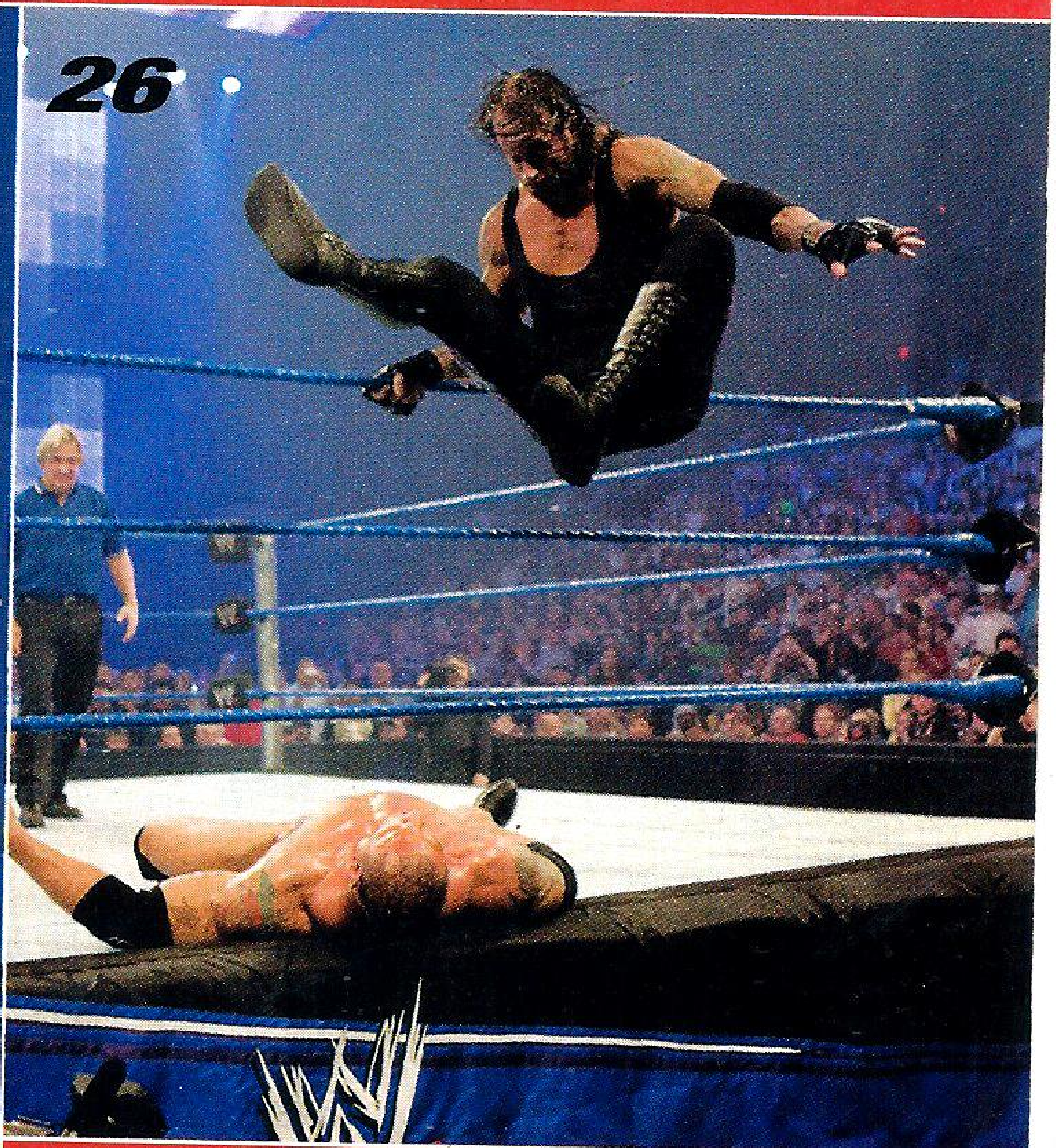
4 SINCERELY YOURS
6 NAMES MAKIN' NEWS by Harry Burkett
12 DATA SHEET: THE MIZ
13 DATA SHEET: ROBERT ROODE
14 ON THE ROAD with Dave Lenker
16 THE INSIDER by Brandi Mankiewicz
18 CAPSULE PROFILE #342: JAMES STORM
20 WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ... ROB VAN DAM? by Mike Lano
22 PLAIN SPEAKING with Matt Brock
60 EDITORS' ROUNDTABLE
64 WRESTLING TIMELINE: EDGE
72 ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS
74 CHECK OUT THIS SHOT!

FEATURES

26 BATISTA: HOW RIC FLAIR IS DESTROYING HIS CAREER
Batista has bigger things to worry about than sticking up for a man who doesn't want to be saved. Trying to punish Shawn Michaels for ending Flair's career is only going to punish one man ... and it's not Michaels

33 ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW
As Ring of Honor makes strides to garner national attention, we thought it was important to point out 10 of its wrestlers you should be noticing

56 HOTSEAT: MATT HARDY
"All I've ever demanded is a fair chance"



26

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Sherry Stravino

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sincerely yours

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BLAST FROM HER PAST

Upon reading the most recent edition of INSIDE WRESTLING, I read that Harry Burkett wrote on the passing on a true Tennessee legend, Sara Lee ("Names Makin' News," Volume 22, 2008). I knew Sara and her husband, Corsica Joe. Back in the late-'90s, I wrestled for NWA Worldwide as Spunkmeyer. Me and my manager, Ernest T, did a little spot with Sara and Joe that ended in a match at the Nashville Municipal Auditorium in December of 1999. We had a lot of fun with the spot. I always enjoyed seeing Sara and Joe, and I was deeply saddened when I heard of her passing. She was a true jewel in this world. I truly enjoyed working with her. We'll miss ya, Sara.

CLARENCE J. SANTINI
wemamedic826@yahoo.com

Some fans, including Barry Tomey of Adah, Pennsylvania, are growing frustrated with many of TNA's more recent angles. Awesome Kong—and a hope for a return to more plausible angles—are enough to keep him watching for now.

LONG WAIT

Is Teddy Long ever going to be general manager again? Vickie and her lover are still keeping us from seeing the matches we want to see.

ROY & BOB SEITZ
Edison, NJ

Why don't they get Teddy Long to manage Raw? He made Smackdown what it is, and then Vickie took over. It is going downhill since she took over. The fans want to see Mr. Long go to Raw to be the general manager because then people will know their money is spent for something worthwhile.

ROSEMARY MOHON
Denton, TX

TNA—WHAT CAN I SAY?

I am an avid TNA fan, but lately I am finding it harder and harder to talk them up. My mother taught me that if I had nothing good to say not to say anything at all. So concerning many (not all, but many) of the recent angles, I am speechless. I will say that Awesome Kong, while not necessarily the most desirable Knockout, is definitely most fitting of the name "Knockout." Her power really is awesome. I also enjoy Booker, but I'm not thrilled with how he's being used.

Please, TNA, give me back my reason to talk up TNA. Give me more X division, more Motor City

PHILTHY RICH

WrestleMania 24 competitor Floyd Mayweather might have won his match against The Big Show, but according to our analysis of the match, Mayweather was the Real Loser at 'Mania, and reader Tom Curry thinks he deserves to be called out as such.

Machine Guns ... and less "Fish Market" streetfights. I beg of you.

BARRY TOMEY
Adah, PA

LOSERS GET CALLED OUT

Once again, bravo on the WrestleMania "Real Winners And Losers" rundown (INSIDE WRESTLING, Volume 22, 2008). I look for it in the magazine every year, and it's not because I want to see the Real Winners. I like to see the Real Losers get ink! Some Real Losers are labeled as such because they are conspicuous by their absence in the biggest event of the year, but others simply fail to measure up. I'm always disappointed when the magazine's Real Loser is the *actual* loser of the match, but I spring back when I see the actual winner named the Real Loser (à la Floyd Mayweather). Thanks again, Dan Murphy, for some really fun analysis!

TOM CURRY
Marietta, GA

HOOKED ON ROH

After reading more and more stories about Ring of Honor, Nigel McGuinness, and The Briscoe Brothers, I grew increasingly curious about the promotion. Then I realized how close I live to their Philly location at the National Guard Armory and to their Edison, New Jersey, shows. I could not let another live show pass me by. There was no excuse for me to miss the next one.

So when ROH came back to Edison on April 12, I was there. It was everything I hoped it would be: solid, technical wrestling at its finest. No frills, few gimmicks. The Briscoe Brothers impressed me in particular. I'm a sucker for all the great brother tandems of the past, and the Briscoes rank right up there for me. If you haven't yet and you get the chance, don't let the opportunity to see ROH get away!

JUSTIN HATHOWAY
Trenton, NJ □

names makin' news

By Harry Burkett

WILLIAM REGAL WAS in the midst of the biggest push of his career when he seemingly lost everything. A lot was at stake when **Vince McMahon** ordered Regal to face **Ken Kennedy** in a "You're Fired" match on the May 19 edition of Raw. To the surprise of the fans in attendance in the Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri, and the viewers watching at home, Regal lost his post as general manager of Raw, his status as the 2008 King of the Ring, and—at least for storyline purposes—his spot on the Raw roster.

But there was more going on than an ordinary storyline. A recent test indicated that Regal had violated WWE's Wellness Policy for the second time. On May 20, WWE announced that Regal had been suspended for 60 days.

The suspension couldn't have come at a worse time for Regal, who, at 43 years of age, was receiving a relatively late push as a performer. He was in the best physical condition of his career and, due to his status as Raw GM and King of the Ring, had become a centerpiece of Raw. He had even challenged then-Raw champ **Randy Orton** in an April 14 main event in London, England.

Industry insiders immediately became concerned that the British star was again struggling with painkillers, an addiction that prompted WCW to release him nearly a decade ago. Yet multiple sources, including **Jim Ross**, have suggested that it's more likely Regal was using training supplements that he didn't realize were in violation of the Wellness Policy.

Ironically, **Jeff Hardy** reappeared on Raw following his own 60-day suspension after a Wellness Policy violation. He battled **Umaga** to a double-countout in yet another installment of their ongoing rivalry.

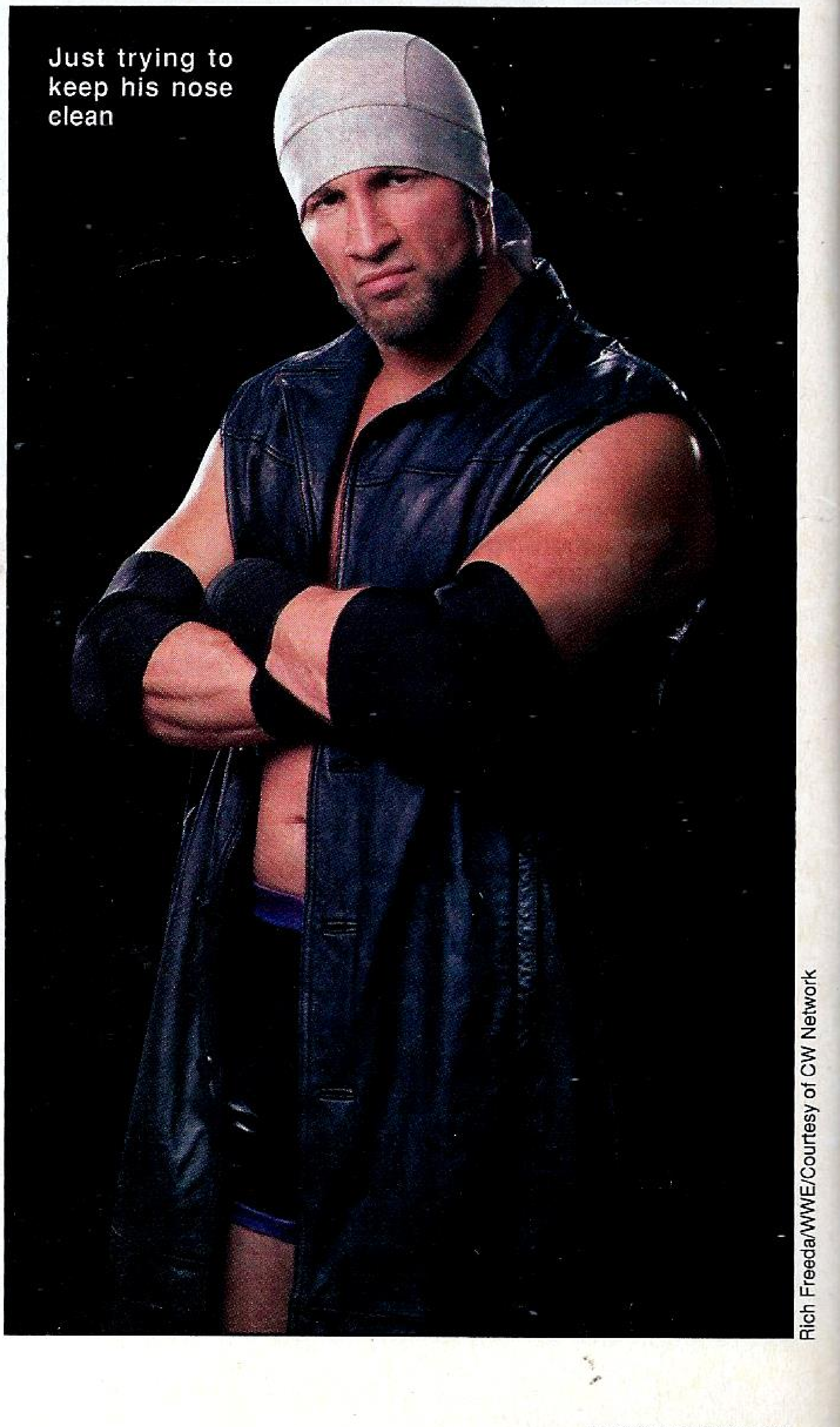
It is unknown whether WWE will renew its push of Regal upon his expected return in July.

Santino Marella got into trouble on May 1 when Hillsborough County police spotted his car drifting back and forth at about 3 a.m. in Tampa. According to tmz.com, he failed two field sobriety tests, including one in which he lost his balance entirely. Officers noted that he had "bloodshot, watery, and glassy eyes." He told the officers that he had started drinking at midnight and had three Miller Lites and one kamikaze. He was charged with suspicion of driving under the influence and taken into custody.

Although the WWE star's blood-alcohol content registered only .061 and .062, which is under the legal limit of .08, he can still be prosecuted because the test was administered nearly two hours after his initial arrest. He was released on $500 bail at 11:35 a.m. that day. Apparently, Tampa must have a wild party scene. Raw wrestler **Ted DiBiase Jr.** was charged with a DUI in Tampa back in February.

Continuing with the police blotter, **Gregory Helms** filed assault charges against a bar patron who challenged him to a fight on the night of May 5. The war of words escalated until Helms was held back by those trying to prevent fisticuffs, and then the patron punched him. **Talia Madison** (known as **Velvet Sky** in TNA), Helms' girlfriend, witnessed the scuffle.

Helms addressed the incident on his website: "After breaking my neck and losing my mom in the same year, the last thing I need to happen is to be arrested for beating up some chump-stain in a bar fight. I've always been



Just trying to keep his nose clean

Rich Freeda/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

KING OF NOTHING

Photo by George Napolitano

amazed when people try to fight pro wrestlers. I mean, I understand—or at least I try to understand—that having any kind of celebrity status, no matter how major or minor, puts a bull's-eye on your back, but what do these people think? Do they think they are gonna get our contract if they somehow win the fight? Do they really think it's gonna prove anything?"

Kudos to Helms for not taking that fight to another level. The former cruiserweight champ, who underwent neck surgery last year, remains on WWE's disabled list.

A very interesting story about **The Great Khali** ran in *The Washington Post* recently, detailing the mythic status that the former Smackdown World champion has assumed in his home country of India. A reporter accompanied Khali during what was described as a working vacation, as the behemoth visited legions of fans at various stops. After waiting three hours to see Khali at a college campus in Mumbai, India, a 24-year-old schoolteacher remarked, "We want to go backstage and touch him, just once. I want to see the 63-inch chest."

Interestingly, Hindi news programs have provided daily reports on Khali, ranging from what he eats to what god he worships. Khali, who was named after the Hindu goddess of power and destruction, said that he doesn't smoke or drink, he eats four meals a day, and he drinks lots of milk. India's president, **Pratibha Patil**, has called him "the pride of the nation."

According to Khali, "I plan to bring honor to India's name abroad, and I feel very proud when I am beating up white wrestlers." Considering that India was repressed under the boot heel of Great Britain for decades, that kind of rhetoric is popular among the nation's masses.

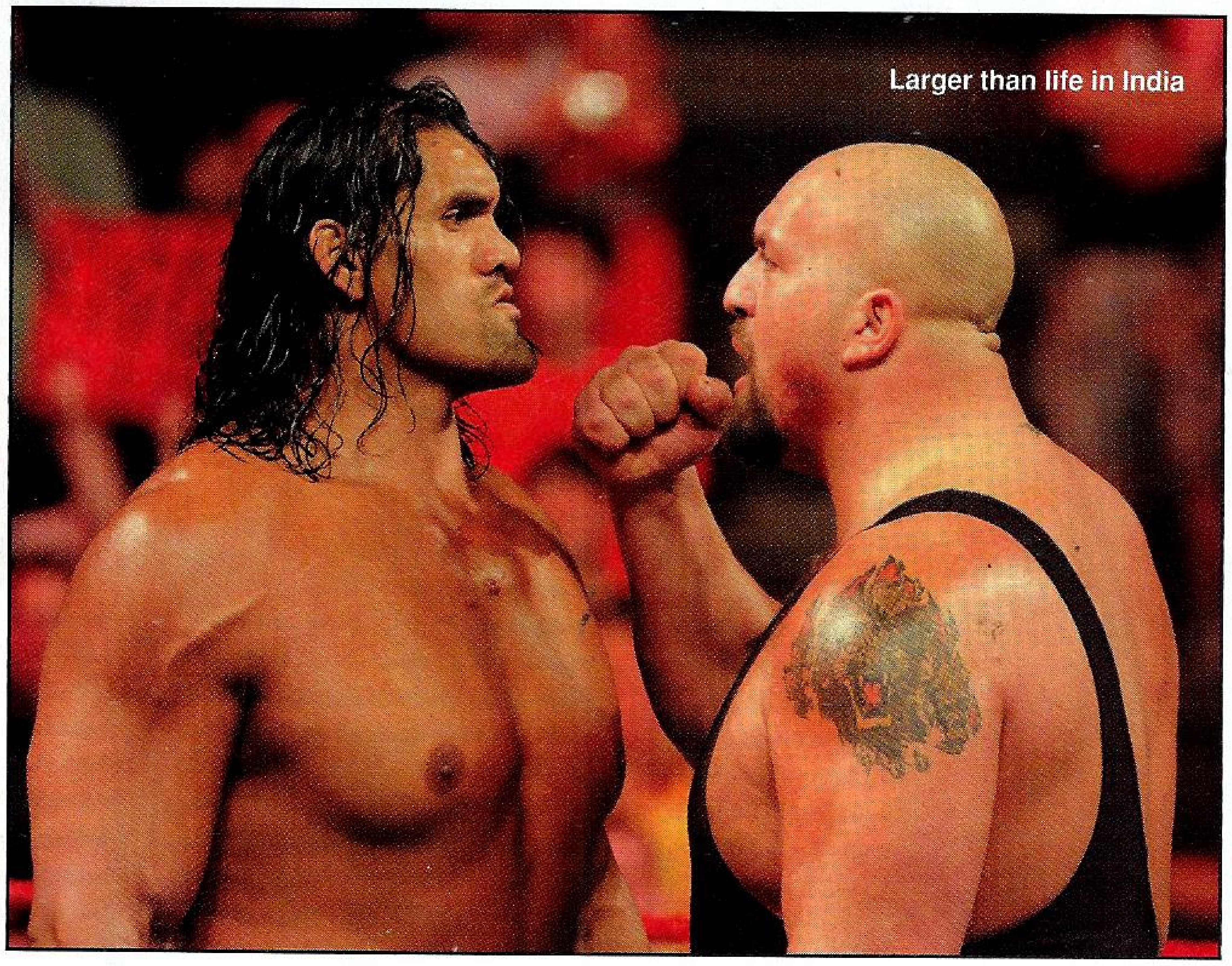
Didn't any of these people see **The Undertaker** beat the crap out of Khali not all that long ago?

Remember the **John Cena-Dwayne Johnson** controversy that was reported in the last issue's "Names Makin' News"? If you recall, during an interview with the U.K. *Sun*, Cena had criticized Johnson for using wrestling as a steppingstone to an acting career, and Johnson responded by criticizing Cena's movie career at the WWE Hall of Fame ceremony.

During a recent followup interview with the *Sun*, Cena first attempted to downplay the controversy and then reiterated his previous criticisms. "If Rock wanted to stand out there for two hours and make fun of me, he could do that—as long as he's there. I just wish he would come by more often."

Cena moves back to opening matches

Then Cena added, "What I don't understand is when I hear people in our business, and not just him, say, 'I've wanted to do this all of my life,' but they're not willing to put forth the commitment and the dedication it takes to be a success here. And Rock is one of those guys who gave the 'I've wanted to do this all of my life' speech, but, in actuality, he wanted to be an actor. Now, trust me, that is totally fine with me. It's okay. But just don't say one thing and do another."


Larger than life in India

This war of words between Cena and Johnson would be terrific if we could actually see a Cena-Rock showdown at WrestleMania 25. But, obviously, Cena doesn't think there's a chance of that happening since—in his mind—The Rock sold out the wrestling business for Hollywood.

It has been a long time since Cena has wrestled an opening match, but that's exactly what he did at Judgment Day, where he faced his old nemesis, **John Bradshaw Layfield**. Reminiscent of their storied battles over the Smackdown World

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title, Layfield employed a methodical offense, trying to outwrestle "The Champ" by relying on the fundamentals. Cena used his raw power to thwart Layfield, first countering an arm submission hold merely by hoisting JBL in the air with said arm, and then lifting JBL while still trapped in a legscissors. In the end, Cena ducked a short-arm clothesline and surprised Layfield with an FU out of nowhere to score the pinfall at the 14-minute mark.

The other hot-ticket match on the card was **Triple-H**'s Raw World title defense against former champ Randy Orton inside a steel cage. As **Larry Zbyszko** would say, it's like a game of human chess when two opponents know each other so well. Case in point: Orton went for a surprise RKO, Triple-H blocked it and went for the pedigree, and then Orton backdropped out of the pedigree. Later, the champion sat a steel chair in the middle of the ring and got ready to pedigree Orton onto it, but Orton dropped Helmsley back-first onto the chair. A weakened Triple-H got revenge, though, when he telegraphed an Orton punt attempt, smashed him over the head with the chair, and pedigreed him for the three-count after 21 minutes of action.

Also of note at the May 18 pay-per-view, Jeff Hardy defeated **Montel Vontavious Porter** ... The Undertaker beat **Edge** by countout, but was not awarded the vacant Smackdown World title ... WWE women's champion **Mickie James** defeated **Beth Phoenix** and **Melina** in a three-way match ... **Shawn Michaels** pinned **Chris Jericho** ... Smackdown World tag team champions **John Morrison** and **The Miz** defeated **C.M. Punk** and **Kane**.

NEWS ANALYSIS

REGAL EXITS. I'm not trying to minimize the seriousness of violating WWE's Wellness Policy, but I was amazed by the efforts of William Regal and Jeff Hardy just prior to their recent suspensions. Slapped with disciplinary action at the peak of their respective careers, Regal (vs. Ken Kennedy) and Hardy (vs. Chris Jericho) wrestled their hearts out before fading into 60-day oblivion. That, at least, is commendable.

SHAME ON SANTINO. No, I don't care that Santino Marella is targeting Jimmy Kimmel's cousin Sal. But Marella's drunk driving stunt was arguably more egregious than the aforementioned Wellness Policy violations. Regal and Hardy only hurt themselves; Marella could have killed someone. I gave Ted DiBiase Jr. a pass for this a couple of issues ago, but come on, you guys have too much to lose for this stupidity.

IS CENA SERIOUS? John Cena believes that Dwayne Johnson betrayed WWE fans by leaving for Hollywood. Furthermore, Cena says that fans are angry because Johnson touts his love of wrestling while refusing to show any commitment to it. Personally, I don't think Johnson owes his life to wrestling, and I think most fans are happy for his success. If Cena had a chance to make more than $10-million a film, wouldn't he take it?

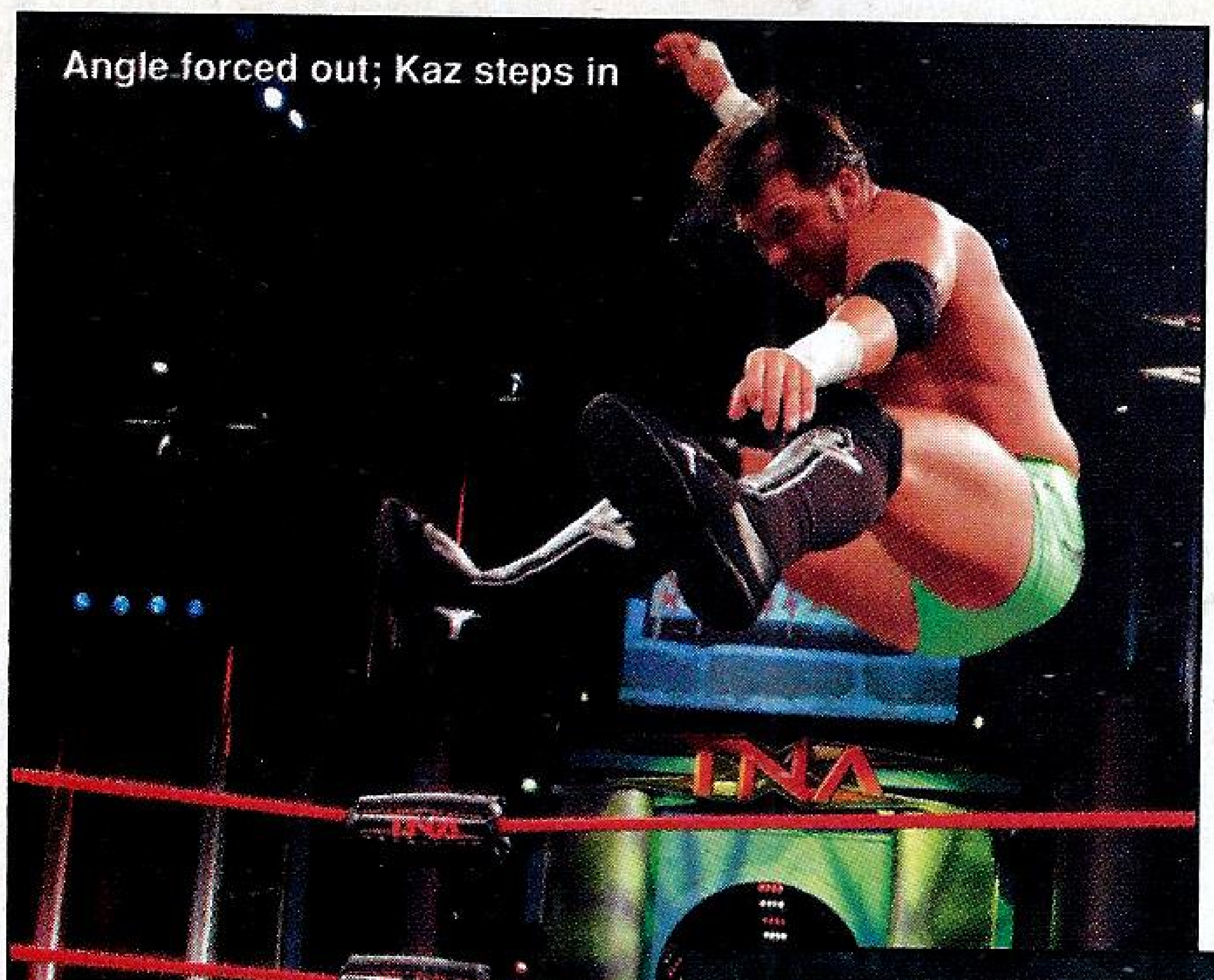
ANGLING FOR DISASTER. If only Kurt Angle could be a leading man in Hollywood! We wouldn't have to cringe every time he took a jarring bump in the ring. A basic bodyslam was enough to injure Angle's neck this time. What next? Will a headlock render him paralyzed? Since moving to TNA, Angle has successfully silenced the critics who have said he should retire. But, Kurt, how much more can your neck take?

STEINER'S BIG MOUTH. I admit it. I have a soft spot for blowhard wrestlers. You know, those rare individuals who don't care whether they offend the McMahons, the Carters, or anyone else. Guys like Jesse Ventura and Bill Goldberg. And Scott Steiner. I think there's a grain of truth to his statements, but he is so over the top that he comes across as bitter and paranoid. You can't call him a coward, though.

Bad news for Kurt Angle. He re-injured his neck during a May 5 match against **Yeok Bal San** in South Korea. Angle suffered the mishap when he was on the receiving end of simple bodyslam. The Olympian wanted to defy his doctor's orders and still face World champion **Samoa Joe** and **Scott Steiner** in a triple-threat bout six days later at Sacrifice, but, fortunately, TNA officials told him to stay on the sidelines.

At Sacrifice, **Kaz** won a 10-way "Terror Dome" match to win a future shot at **Petey Williams**' X division champi-

Angle forced out; Kaz steps in



A bit of embarrassment for Adonis

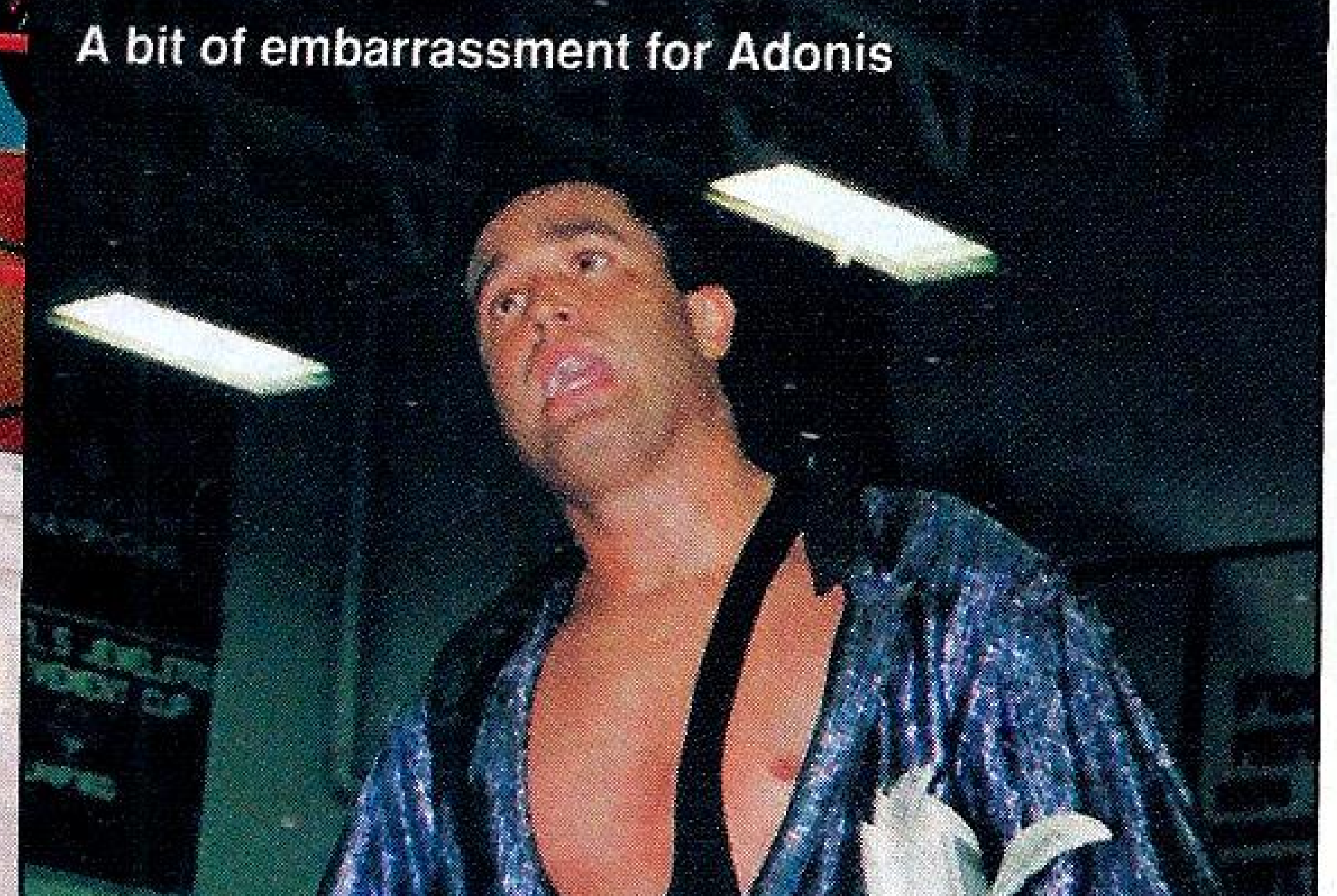


Photo by Tim Walker

onship and the right to replace Angle in the three-way World heavyweight title match later in the evening. Samoa Joe won that bout when he caught Steiner with a roundhouse kick and, in an amazing sight to behold, dropped "Big Poppa Pump" with a musclebuster to score the pinfall at the 15-minute mark.

News from Northeast Wrestling: TNA World champ Samoa Joe has made an impressive showing in this promotion as of late, defeating former Ring of Honor rival **Xavier** in Thiells, New York, and then forcing Scott Steiner into submission the following night in Bloomfield, Connecticut ... **Booker T** defeated **Joey Matthews** in a recent match ... **"Purty" Kurt Adonis** has made a spectacle of himself in recent months, coming out on the losing end of his feud with Talia Madison and midget star **Short Sleeve Sampson**, being embarrassed by **Roddy Piper** during a special "Piper's Pit," and getting pinned by the mayor of Torrington, Connecticut, in a tag team match.

This 'n' that: With his brother, **Mark Briscoe**, out of action, **Jay Briscoe** has opted to vacate the Ring of Honor tag team title, which will be up for grabs in a future tournament. I'm sure Jay's current partner, **Austin Aries**, was thrilled by that ... **Drew McIntyre** and **Stu Sanders** defeated **Eddie Colon** and **Eric Perez** for the Florida tag team title on May 7. Sanders once held the OVW tag title with another Brit, **Paul Birchall** ... Highlights of WrestleMania 24 will air in a special presentation on MyNetworkTV on October 3, the night before Smackdown premieres on the fledgling network. Significant portions of WrestleMania haven't aired on network television since Fox aired highlights of WrestleMania XI in 1995 ... WWE received the first-ever Corporate Patriot Award at the annual G.I. Film Festival in Washington, D.C. **Ric Flair** accepted the honor, which was awarded in recognition of WWE's support of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From the Say What You Really Mean Dept.: Scott Steiner certainly hasn't mellowed over the years, as he proved during a May 7 interview with **Kevin Eck** of the *Baltimore Sun*. Here are just a few tidbits:

About his life-threatening trachea injury in Puerto Rico: "The next time I woke up—I had been in an induced coma for two days because the pain would have been so bad—I felt like I was choking. It felt like I was going to drown ... I was kind of messed up for three or four months, knowing that I could have been dead."

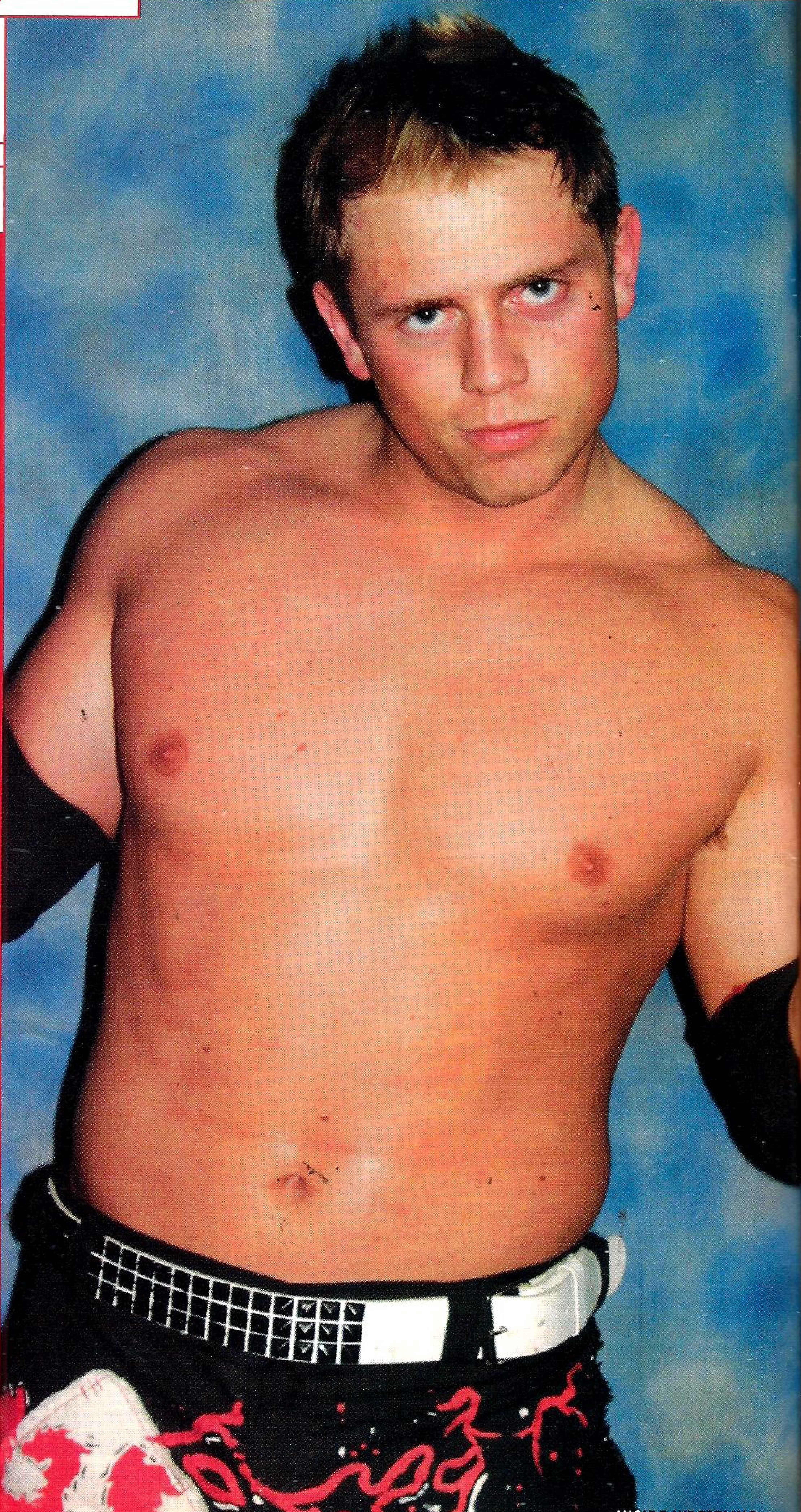
About **Stephanie McMahon**: "The only reason she's involved is because she was part of the lucky sperm club. That's her only qualification."

About Vince McMahon: "I really didn't think Vince was that stupid, to buy out [WCW] and then bury it. How stupid is that? That's his ego."

About Ric Flair's induction into the WWE Hall of Fame: "Remember the NWO skit when **X-Pac** was supposed to be Ric Flair, and every time they asked him a question, tears would come down his face? ... He was a crybaby. He was a little [sissy], man. And for him to do it during the match and then at the induction ceremony, come on, man. Are you kidding me?"

Yikes! Maybe BPP ought to hook up with **The Ultimate Warrior** for a panel discussion. Somebody save me a ringside seat for that one! ☐

THE MIZ



HEIGHT: 6'1"
WEIGHT: 231
HOMETOWN: Parma, OH

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: November 16, 2007—with perennial tag team titleholder John Morrison, The Miz captured his first piece of WWE world championship hardware by defeating Matt Hardy and MVP on Smackdown. Once enemies, The Miz and Morrison quickly become one of the top tag teams in the sport.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: The Miz has a distinct advantage of being underestimated by nearly every opponent he faces. While still learning the nuances of the game, Miz' athleticism and ability to learn quickly has brought him success faster than most expected. When his wrestling acumen develops further, Miz could blossom into a very solid wrestler. Plus, he can agitate with the best of them.

WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: The tag team division is the perfect place for The Miz at this point in his career. While it works to his advantage to have a partner at this point in his development, he needs to study singles competitors and understand how different that can be from the team concept.

PET FINISHER: Reality Check

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: In June 2007, The Miz was ECW's representative in a match to determine whether his brand would receive an additional pick in the WWE draft. Facing the formidable and hygienically challenged Snitsky, The Miz was unsuccessful in his first real challenge with a tangible result on the line; however, he showed enough fortitude and resilience to earn a top spot on the ECW roster.

OUTLOOK FOR 2008: It is safe to assume that, at some point in 2008, the team of Miz and Morrison will implode. There is far too much ego between the two of them for them to continue as a team through the year. Until then, The Miz should enjoy the ride, continue to hone his craft, and irritate fans and opponents for as long as he can.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "He may not be as sexy or talented as John Morrison, but I could've done worse in finding a partner. There's plenty of talent to work with and I've got a feeling that in time he could be nearly as good as me."—John Morrison

ROBERT ROODE

HEIGHT: 6'
WEIGHT: 230
HOMETOWN: New York, NY

GREATEST MOMENT TO DATE: October 12, 2004—Roode picked up the most prestigious championship of his career by capturing the NWA World tag team title with Eric Young as part of Team Canada. The duo held the title for less than three weeks, but the experience set up not only Roode, but also the entire group, as a recognizable force in TNA.

HE DOES IT SO WELL: Roode is that "tweener" wrestler who can easily match speed with an X division foe or go pound-for-pound with anyone in the heavyweight division. Never unwilling to skirt the rules, Roode has already developed a killer instinct that many wrestlers at his stage of development would love.

WHERE HE NEEDS TO IMPROVE: He wants the fans to hate him, and while he might be successful on that front, he has failed to earn their respect. In the ring, Roode tends to be predictable. Plus, he has an awful habit of walking into an opponent's offensive onslaught without a real plan of attack.

PET FINISHER: The Payoff

BIGGEST TEST TO DATE: Although he came out on the losing end more often than not, Roode's prodding of Booker T and Sharmell into a nasty and intensely personal feud has proven to be his biggest test in TNA. Still, it felt as if he did not plan much for what would happen after getting Booker's attention.

OUTLOOK FOR 2008: Roode cannot seem to keep beautiful valets with him for very long, nor does he work well as part of a group anymore. It looks as if the rich kid from Wall Street will face most of 2008 on his own. The remainder of the year should provide a great test for Roode and may help to frame the next few years of his career.

QUICKIE EXPERT ANALYSIS: "That man will lie, cheat, and steal whenever he can. I never liked the way he did things, but I'm afraid it will work for him. Robert's going to succeed whether the fans want him to or not."—Traci Brooks

on the road

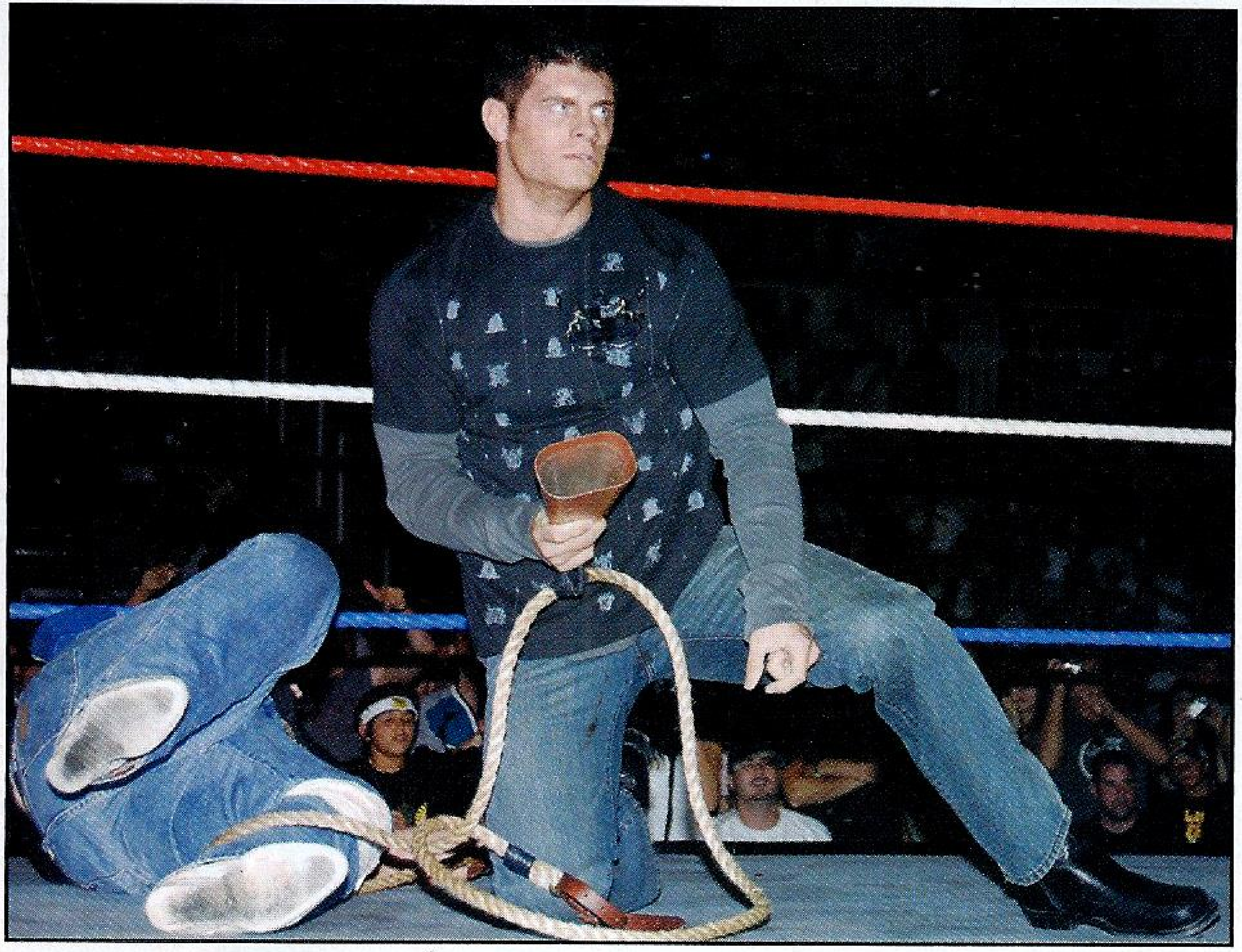
With Dave Lenker

I SERIOUSLY DOUBT that on the day a pimply-faced teenager named Cody Runnels listened intently as his famous father gave him that all-important *talk*, he expected things to turn out like this. I have similar doubts about the day on which a beanstalk of an adolescent named Harry Smith got the same talk from his equally famous dad.

You know the talk—the one about young Runnels and young Smith having to pay their dues just like everyone else even though they both had fathers who rose to superstardom in the high-profile profession they, too, had chosen for themselves. *I know I'm going to have to prove myself to get my chance,* each must have more or less thought at the time, *but imagine what they might do with me.*

Cody, who has since taken the famous wrestling surname of his father, Dusty Rhodes, and Harry, who now goes by D.H. Smith as something of a tribute to father "British Bulldog" Davey Boy Smith, both have made it to the big dance sooner rather than later, but they may be wishing right about now that it had happened later rather than sooner.

These are some serious dues, folks.



Cody Rhodes made his debut in WWE in a feud against another pedigreed superstar, Randy Orton. But Rhodes never achieved an impressive win until he joined forces with his top opponent, Hardcore Holly. Now Rhodes holds a Raw World tag team belt, but his reign doesn't seem to be building any momentum for the young talent.

No doubt, both men made it to WWE thanks in some part to the efforts of their famous dads, whether it be through direct training, genetics, influence, or some combination of the three. Sadly, Davey Boy was very hands-on in training young Harry and hoped he himself had one last WWE run in him that he could share with his son when he died in 2002 when Harry was 16 years old.

Cody and Harry probably got WWE developmental deals before they would have had their surnames been something like Jones and Miller instead. Still, I would imagine they heeded their fathers' words about paying their dues as they prepared to make the trek to Louisville to begin their respective stints in OVW before they joined the main roster. Still, how could they not dream about the possibilities when that call came?

What must it be like to team with Hardcore Holly ... or to get squashed by Umaga and JBL in mere seconds right there live on Raw? Thousands would be watching live at the arena, millions more from their sofas and recliners at home?

So much for dreams.

I recently finished a book by David Baldacci called *The Whole Truth*. One of the main characters in the novel makes use of a new (and very real) concept called "perception management" to bring the world remarkably close to World War III, with the Russians again cast as the bad guys.

We have seen and will continue to see a lot of "spin doctoring" from the candidates in this presidential election year. Spin doctors specialize in putting a positive slant on facts. If a candidate is caught on camera screaming at a reporter after being asked what he considers a stupid question, a good spin doctor might try to convince you that it was only because the candidate is so passionate about the issue brought up by the reporter.

Perception management uses outright lies and tries to present them as truth.

I thought a lot about how wrestling promoters can so easily use perception management.

Cody Rhodes and D.H. Smith

TECH 2
TECH 3

The New Hart Foundation was expected to be a big hit, but the most popular of the Hart cousins, Teddy Hart, ruined those plans when his behavior got him dumped by WWE. Now remaining cousins Harry Smith and Nattie Neidhart are both on television, but Smith (like Rhodes) doesn't seem to be living up to his father's legacy.

probably were promoted to WWE too soon. I saw more of Smith in his pre-WWE career than I did Rhodes, but it was clear even a few years ago that he had a lot of impressive raw tools. You can't get much of a read on his skills when Umaga is trampling him.

And Rhodes, well, he won't likely build much momentum teaming with Hardcore Holly, tag team championship or no tag team championship.

You see, with Smith and Rhodes, WWE could have taken one of three routes, assuming it had big plans for them. For some reason, it chose the only route likely to come to a dead end. It chose to bring them up and brand them as two ordinary mid-carders. It could have kept both of them in the developmental system for an extended period to ensure that they were as polished as could be before an international audience got to see them, but Vince McMahon isn't long on patience. Or it could have brought them up when it did and made us believe they were everything their fathers were and maybe a little more. It could have at least worked for a while, and maybe even if they weren't quite ready, they could grow into their push, so to speak. Perception management at its finest.

Bill Goldberg, you might remember, was never anything more than an average wrestler. That was the case when he started in WCW and when last we saw him in a WWE ring. But we rarely if ever got to see those deficiencies. We saw only his strengths, and the fact that he had a hellacious spear and awe-inspiring jackhammer finisher in his repertoire was enough to convince us he was special.

Going back more than a decade from that, anyone who watched the Von Erich family in their heyday will remember how talented brothers Kerry, David, and Kevin were. Their father, Fritz, was the promoter back then. He used his power to push his two younger sons, Mike and Chris, at the beginning of their careers. People were willing to buy them as something special. Eventually they were exposed as not being the wrestlers their brothers were, but perception management was effective for a while. It was worth taking a shot.

I'm not trying to convince you either Rhodes or Smith was worthy of a Goldberg-like monster push at the start, but at least one of them could have gotten the Randy Orton treatment. He was pushed as something special from the day he started in WWE, in large part because he was a third-generation star.

WWE teased us at the beginning with its use of Rhodes. He had a chance to avenge the vicious beating and concussion Orton gave to his father. He wrestled competitively against Orton, but he ultimately lost to him on Raw, and soon he was losing match after match to Holly to set up the two of them forming a team.

Smith might be something special in WWE today if not were for his talented but enigmatic cousin Teddy Hart. Rumors were flying when Smith, Hart, and Nattie (Natalya) Neidhart were in OVW together that they'd be promoted as the latest incarnation of The Hart Foundation. Hart, however, was his usual nutty self and was released by WWE. Smith has since served a 30-day suspension for a violation of WWE's Wellness Policy, so that could be a partial explanation for his lack of push.

Whatever the reasons, Rhodes and Smith have a lot of work to do if they're ever going to have the chance to be main-eventers. Maybe neither one is good enough to make it that far, but at least one of them should have been given a real chance at the beginning. If they had proved unworthy, they could have been dropped to the mid-card ranks, where they are today anyway. As I write this, I see that Ted DiBiase Jr. has started competing on WWE hsouse shows. I hope he's been in touch with Cody and Harry recently. Maybe they can help him manage his own perceptions of being the son of a famous wrestling father. □

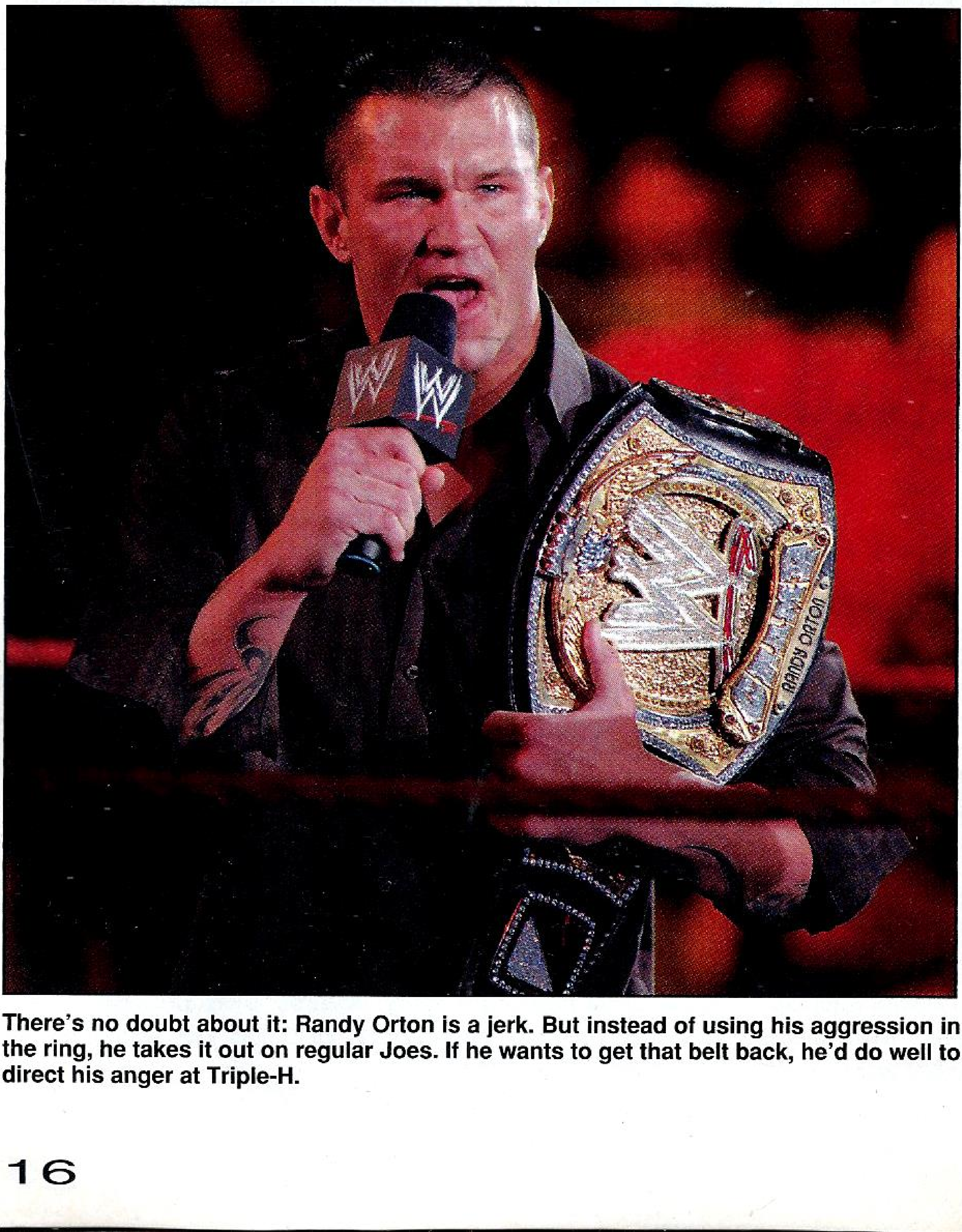
the insider

By Brandi Mankiewicz

SILLY ME. I just happened to find myself in Baltimore on the eve of Backlash. I completely didn't even think when I made the reservation. I thought about rearranging my schedule, but I really wanted to meet up with my normal life friends and hit the town. Why should I let wrestling get in the way of fun? So I packed my overnight bag and headed south.

Once I handed my Jeep over to my favorite Nigerian valet at the hotel, I quickly rolled my bag into the lobby, looking—waiting—to see a pack of marks. I made it to my harbor-view room on the 12th floor without nary a John Cena T-shirt sighting. I felt relieved. Then a horrible thought creeped into my mind: Where was Randy Orton staying? Orton's track record of being a less-than-spectacular hotel guest is legendary. On the WWE's recent European tour, it was alleged that Orton pitched a Diva-sized hissy fit when the hotel staff woke him up earlier than asked. He threw his room service food and tossed it onto the stunned hotel workers. Funny, but I thought it was customary to tip them with money, not food.

Basically, Randy Orton is a jerk. Sure, he's a blue chipper born into a wrestling family who offered a solid pedigree and reputation. But instead of honoring his family by being the best damn wrestler he can be, he constantly disgraces them. I wish his father "Cowboy" Bob would whack his kid over the head with that famed arm cast of his.


There's no doubt about it: Randy Orton is a jerk. But instead of using his aggression in the ring, he takes it out on regular Joes. If he wants to get that belt back, he'd do well to direct his anger at Triple-H.

If this were Orton's first foray into being a total jackass, I'd give him some slack. WWE's touring schedule isn't easy and those overseas tours are brutal. Instead, he's just resorting to his old habits. The list of Orton's nefarious accomplishments is actually longer than his list of career accolades. It seems that no matter what he does to clean up his life, he still finds himself being a jerk. I guess it can be likened to a recovering addict always finding a need for that fix. Unfortunately, I think the only thing that needs to be fixed here is Orton. He has character flaws that are deeply rooted in his psyche, and I'm not sure if he can be reformed.

Now, I've always had a soft spot for wrestling heels. I dig those who have that devilish streak and use it to their advantage in the ring. Randy Orton certainly has that streak, but he has it mixed up. He should be using that anger and deviousness to attack his opponents, not hotel staff. There is a time and place for everything. There are ways to channel evil intentions into something more meaningful. Why waste energy terrorizing regular people who don't deserve it when you can use that energy terrorizing wrestlers, taking titles, and adding money to the bank? Orton's actions only result in bad publicity and possible banishment from certain hotel chains.

Orton's a liability to WWE. I don't care how much he swears he's a changed man. He swore his recent marriage and impending daddyhood

WWE and Orton swear the "Legend Killer" is a changed man, but his most recent actions prove otherwise. If Orton had half the talent, he would have been gone long ago.

have made him a more stable man, but it obviously hasn't since his Euro hissy fit came after his nuptials. His well-documented behavior has the potential to tarnish WWE's reputation. WWE's spending tons of effort to change the mainstream media's perception of its business. Randy Orton's antics could effectively negate any headway that's been made.

Enough about Orton, I have dinner reservations to attend.

I had plans to meet up with Harry Burkett and Liz Hunter at this great little Spanish restaurant on Pratt Street, but both of them cancelled earlier in the week. The only one left to meet up with for the INSIDE WRESTLING lovefest was my lovely uncle, Matt Brock. As I ordered my selections and a pitcher of sangria, I got a call from Uncle Matt backing out of "sharing food with people who don't wash their hands." No worries. More food and sangria for me. Besides, I had a column to finish and my laptop was sitting nestled between my plates.

While sitting on the open patio overlooking the harbor I have an awesome view of the Inner Harbor. It's sunny, warm and beautiful. Possibly some of the best weather I've ever had on a trip here. Usually, when the temperatures are in the 80s, there is also horrible humidity—which leads to that lovely Harbor stench that is enough to make the Harbor hobos want to leave. Thankfully, the only smell I have is wafting upward from my food. I'm glad the other three couldn't make it. I'm enjoying my alone time—with my Instant Messaging, of course. I love technology. I'm never really alone.

Below me on the street I can see a smattering of wrestling fans amid the crowds. Wrestling fans really do stand out from normal people. I know I always harp on fans for being so ugly, but they really are. I've never seen so many mullets in the harbor as I do now. Luckily, I'm starting my second pitcher of sangria so I'm not noticing as much. Maybe I'll keep drinking until they're all good looking.

Hopefully Randy Orton isn't in a room next to mine so I can sleep off this stupor in peace. ☐

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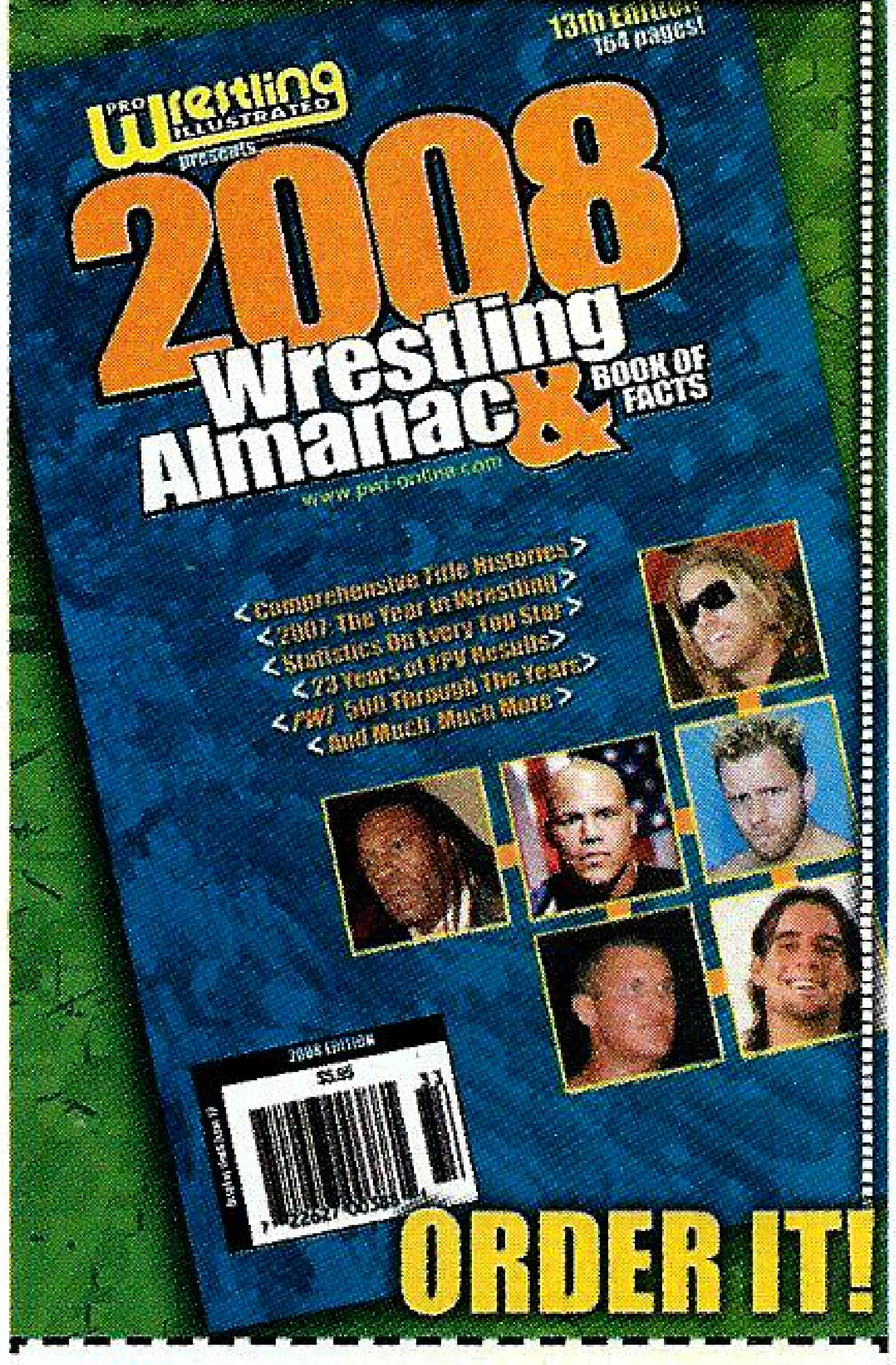
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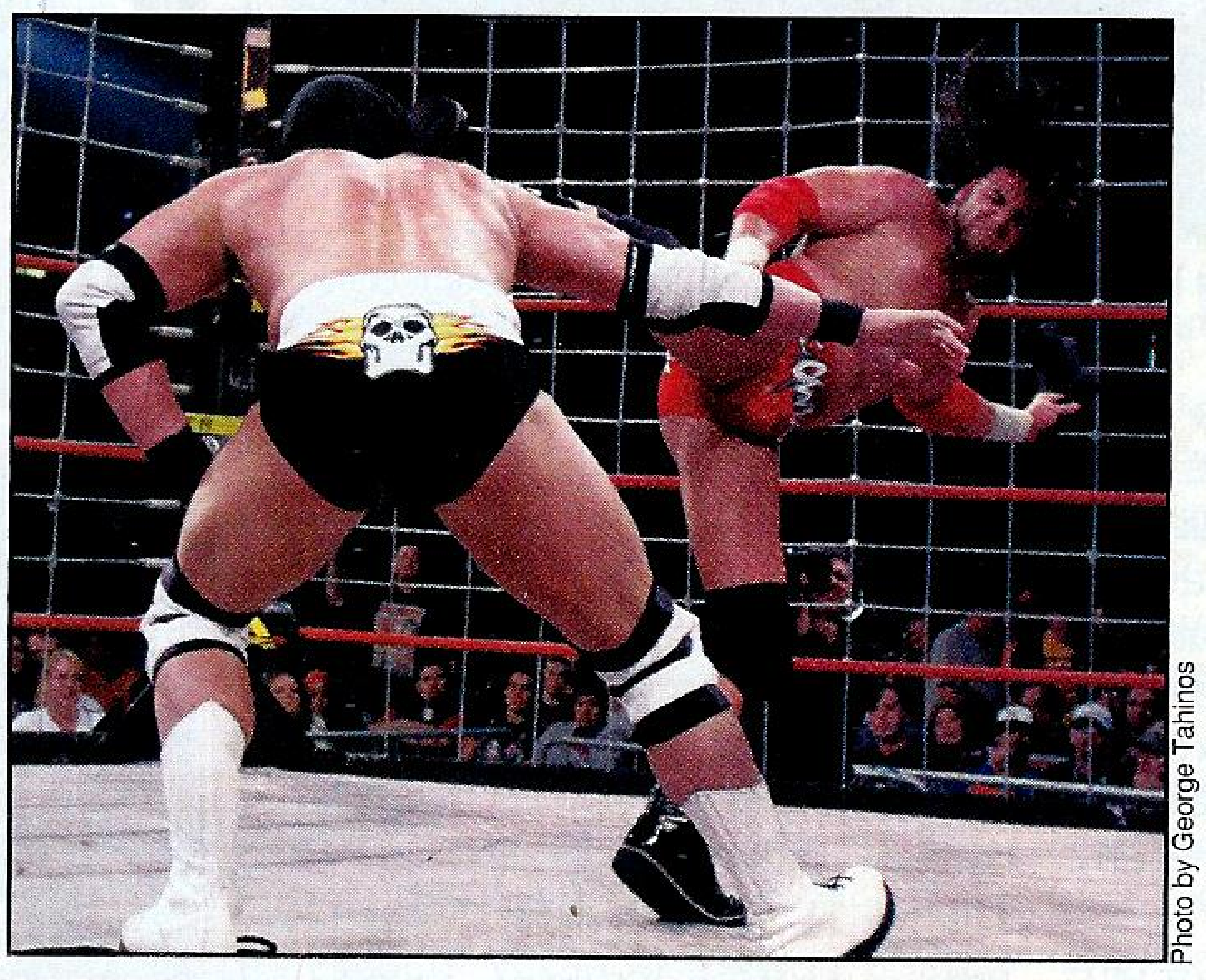
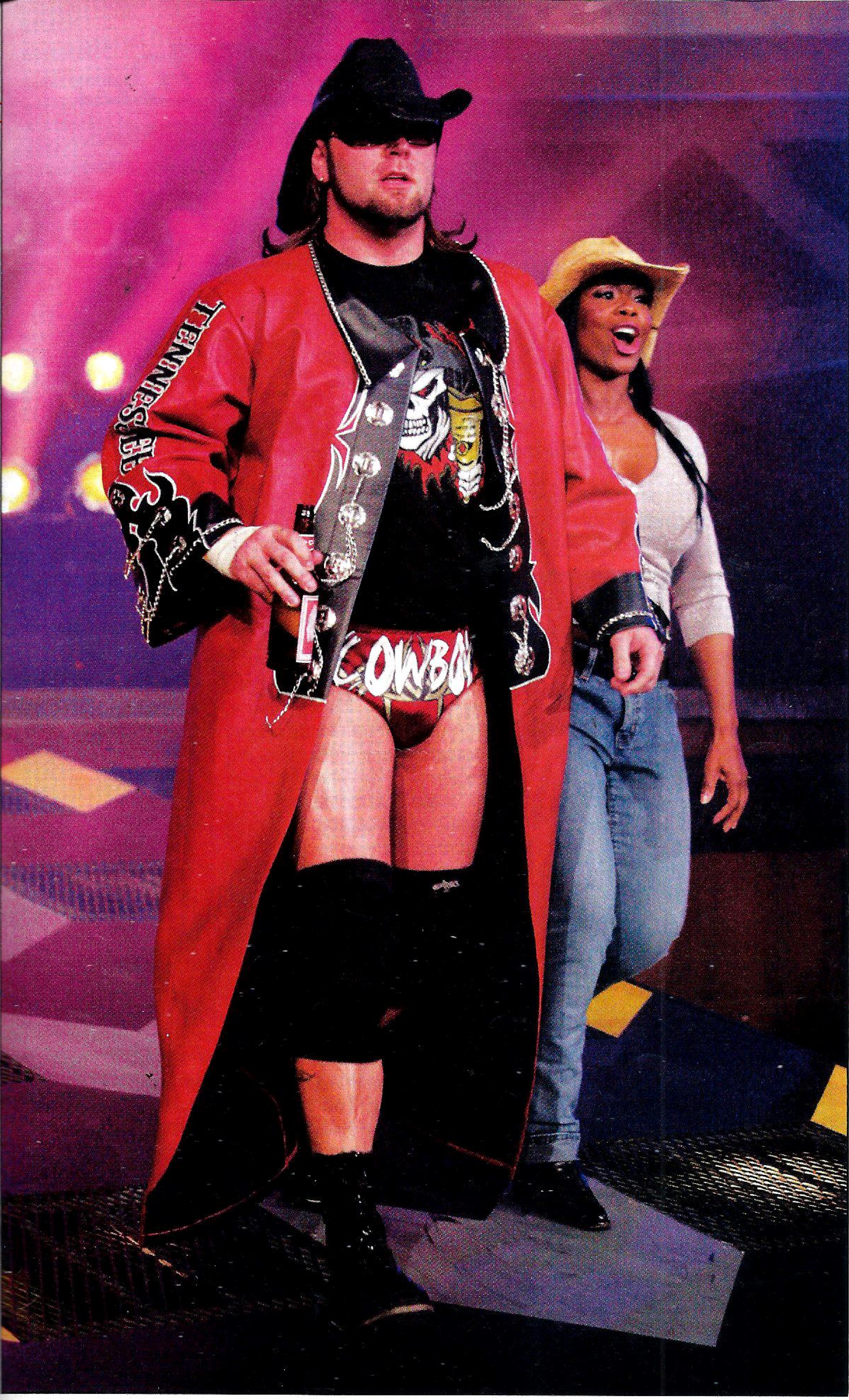
JAMES STORM

STRAIGHT OUT OF the heartland of Tennessee, James Black has always been true to his cowboy roots, for good or ill ... A highly talented high school wrestler, Black captured the state title as an amateur before turning pro in 1995 ... Trained by Kelly Wolfe and Shane Morton ... Broke a shoulder while training, which hampered his progression ... Competed in his first professional match on November 1, 1997 ... Worked with WCW in 2000 under the name James Storm and left for the indy circuit after WWE purchased the company ... Hired by TNA after an impressive "Legends Night" match with Christopher Harris ... Duo was put together as a team and became known as America's Most Wanted ... Storm attributed the name to his trouble with authority ... Rarely seen in TNA without dark glasses and a beer bottle ... Captured the first of seven NWA tag team championships on September 18, 2002 ... Hospitalized with a severely bruised lower back following a match with Triple X in 2004 ... With Harris, awarded *PWI* Tag Team Of The Year for 2004 ... Lost to Jeff Jarrett in his first real shot at solo success in TNA in 2004 ... Teamed with "American Dream" Dusty Rhodes for a brief period ... America's Most Wanted aligned itself with Jarrett in 2005, taking Gail Kim as manager ... Helped Jarrett reclaim the NWA World championship in what became known as the "Controversy In Canada" ... Quickly became the more brooding and sinister member of the rulebreaking faction ... Suffered what was originally believed to be a debilitating neck injury at Turning Point 2005 ... Wrestled against The Naturals in their last match with manager Chris Candido before his untimely death ... Defeated A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels just after 12:00 a.m. on January 1, 2006 on a special edition of *Impact* ... Won the World Wrestling Council tag team championship with Cassidy Riley in March 2006 ... Lost as a member of Jarrett's Army at Lockdown 2006 ... Match at TNA's Hardcore War at the old ECW arena ended with a shower of chairs thrown by the fans ... Accidentally cost duo an NWA World tag team title match at Turning Point 2006 when he hit Homicide with a beer bottle. The impact sent glass into Harris' eyes, allowing LAX to pin the Mexican flag and win the flag match and title shot ... Began to show signs that he didn't believe the losing and mistakes were his fault ... Split with Harris on December 14, 2006 ... Buried former partner Harris in an interview with Mike Tenay on *Impact* ... Beat Jake "The Snake" Roberts as part of a card for NWA Wrestle Birmingham ... Lost in a "Texas Death" match to Harris at Sacrifice 2007 ... Relinquished the services of Kim in favor of Jacqueline Moore ... Often heard bellowing "Sorry about your damn luck" ... Outlasted Harris in a bumbling blindfold match at Lockdown 2007 ... Spat beer in the face of former Tennessee Titans tight end Frank Wycheck during a press conference ... Lost in a subsequent tag mach, with Ron Killings, to Jerry Lynn and Wycheck at Slammiversary ... Feuded with Rhino in mid-2007, playing up his opponent's former problems with alcohol ... Defeated Rhino at Victory Road 2007, before losing to him in a grudge match at No Surrender ... Battled former associate Eric Young in various drinking contests ... Lost the "drinking championship belt" to Young before taking it back in a ladder match ... Storm's coveted drinking championship belt was destroyed by Rhino in a fit of rage ... Deathly afraid of heights ... Sidelined for two weeks in 2008 to recover from fall through table during "Elevation X Scaffold" match ... Attacked Sting the following week on *Impact* by smashing a beer bottle over his head ... Lost to Sting in a grudge match on *Impact* ... Member of Team Tomko at Lockdown 2008 ... Took the loss for his team after being gored by Rhino ... Feuded with Matt Morgan in May 2008 ... Confirmed a relationship with TNA Knockout Crystal in 2008. □



A blindfold match between former tag partners James Storm and Chris Harris left the Lockdown 2007 audience reaching for their own blindfolds, but Storm prevailed in the end. Ally-turned-enemy Harris left behind TNA, and any chance of an AMW reunion.

Photo by George Tahinos


TENNESSEE
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JAMES STORM

342

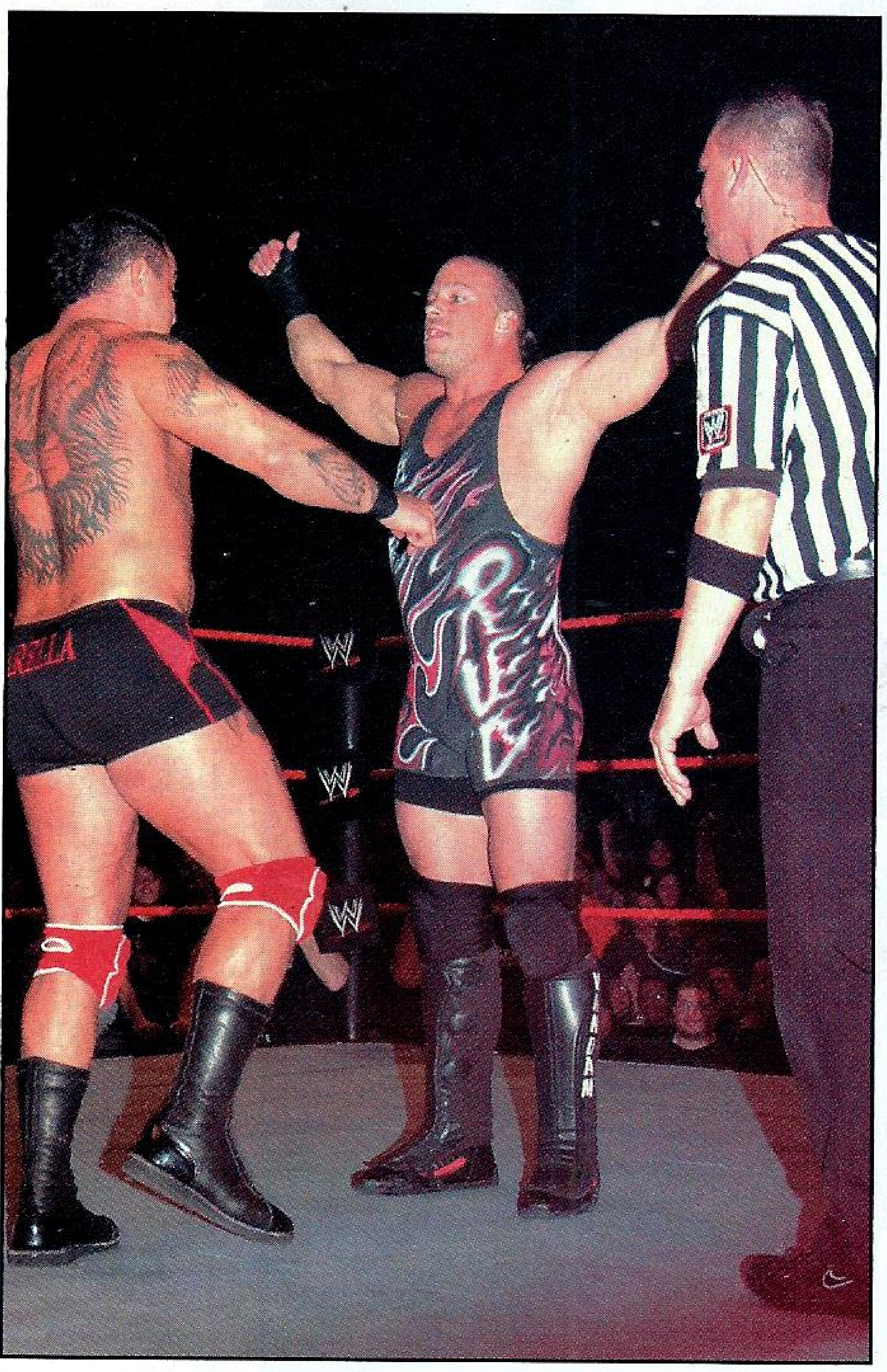
whatever happened to...

By Mike Lano

Rob Van Dam

ARGUABLY THE BIGGEST pop at Raw's 15th anniversary show last December was the surprise one-night-only appearance of the still incredibly popular "Mr. Monday Night," Rob Van Dam. It was six months earlier, after beating Randy Orton in a stretcher match at One Night Stand II, that Van Dam walked away from the sport, having allowed his WWE contract to expire.

Unlike Trish Stratus and Lita, who also made appearances on the 15th anniversary show, Van Dam's absence was of the sabbatical variety. He will be back, though probably not with WWE.



Fans were elated when "Mr. Monday Night" stopped by the Raw 15th anniversary show to defeat Santino Marella. But RVD's WWE comeback ended there, as Van Dam cites numerous obligations taking precedence.

"I don't think I missed a step there even with the long break, and the Raw response blew me away," RVD recently told INSIDE WRESTING. "Many thought I was coming back full-time that night, but right now, I have other things to take care of.

Foremost in his mind is the health of his wife, Sonya, who is battling colon cancer. Rob's decision to take a hiatus from wrestling predated his knowledge of Sonya's condition. "I would've immediately left to fight this with Sonya had I not already taken time off," he said. "When I had my ECW accident [a broken ankle in 2000], Sonya devoted herself to helping me recover. She completely took charge. She helped when I fractured the same ankle after wrestling Pez Whatley barefoot. Sonya also was my angel when I nearly lost my eye after a piece of broken table sliced my eyelid. So it's my time for her. Sharon Osborne, Farrah Fawcett, Patrick Swayze all are going through similar cancer fights. Sharon won and has been colon cancer free for years."

Doctors removed part of Sonya's colon this past spring in an attempt to get the cancer and she soon returned home to recover. Sonya said the recovery produced "some miserably painful days, but I'm making my comeback. The pain was due to 'post-operation-itis.'" Her body swelled intensely (which is what commonly occurs), causing bruising and pain. Doctors carefully monitored her, and finally the swelling diminished and her condition has since improved.

At this point, they really don't know what kind of overall therapy treatment they're facing besides chemo and radiation. "Whatever the doctors say, we'll do," Sonya said. "We really appreciate all the support everyone's sent our way. The love, prayers, and positive energy helped, and we read everything. All the phone calls, texts, e-mails, and other genuine, straight-hearted messages mean a lot. Once again fans have been amazing during challenging times. Your personal stories have given me strength in the knowledge that I'm not alone in this battle. I want to thank everyone."

Rob has also stayed amazingly positive during his wife's battle. "The funny thing Sonya said is that she'd rather go through the agony of this than ever surviving a divorce with me," he said. "So I hope I've done a good job all these years as a loving husband. She's my best friend, an awesome and amazing person. Our strength as a

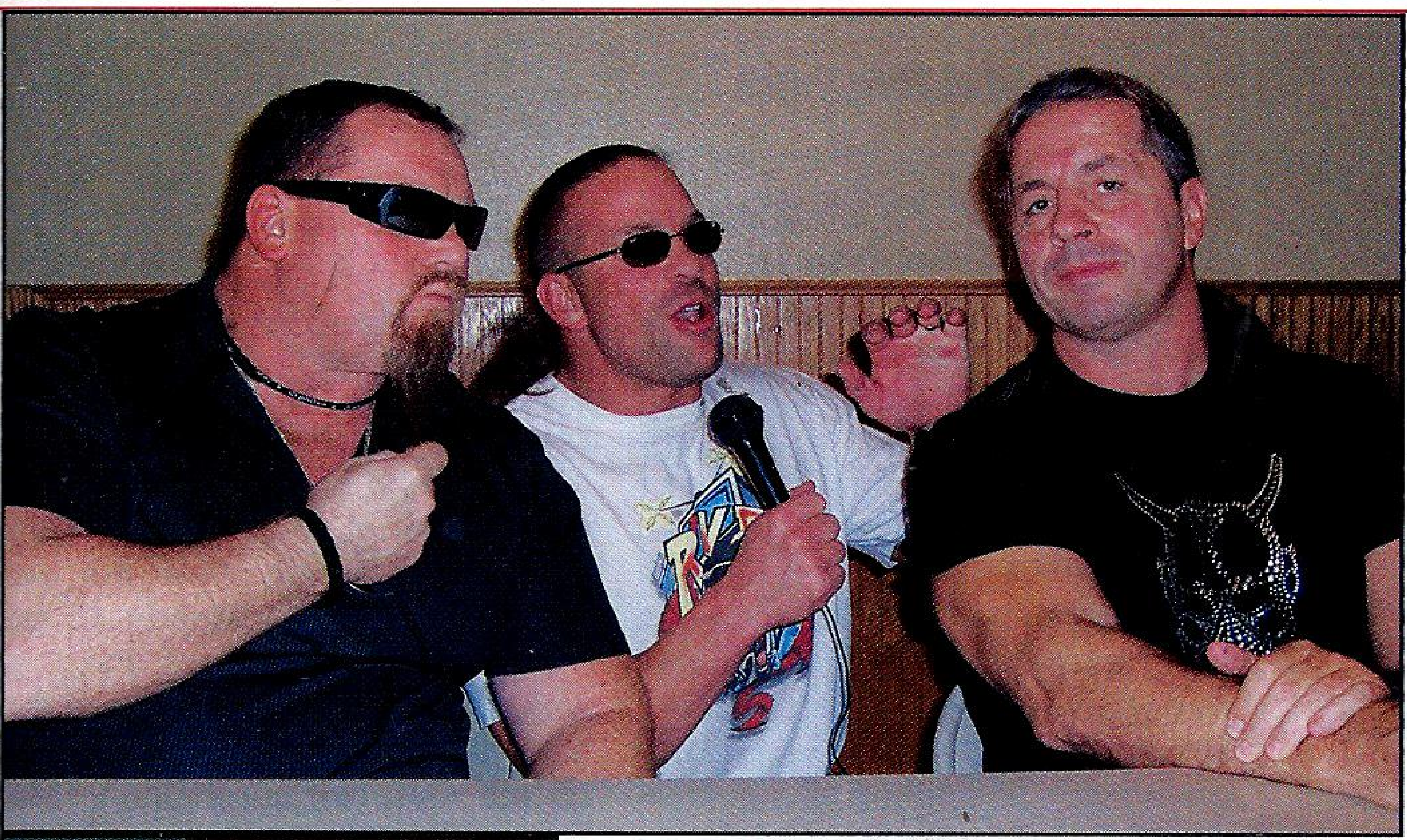


Photo by Mike Lano

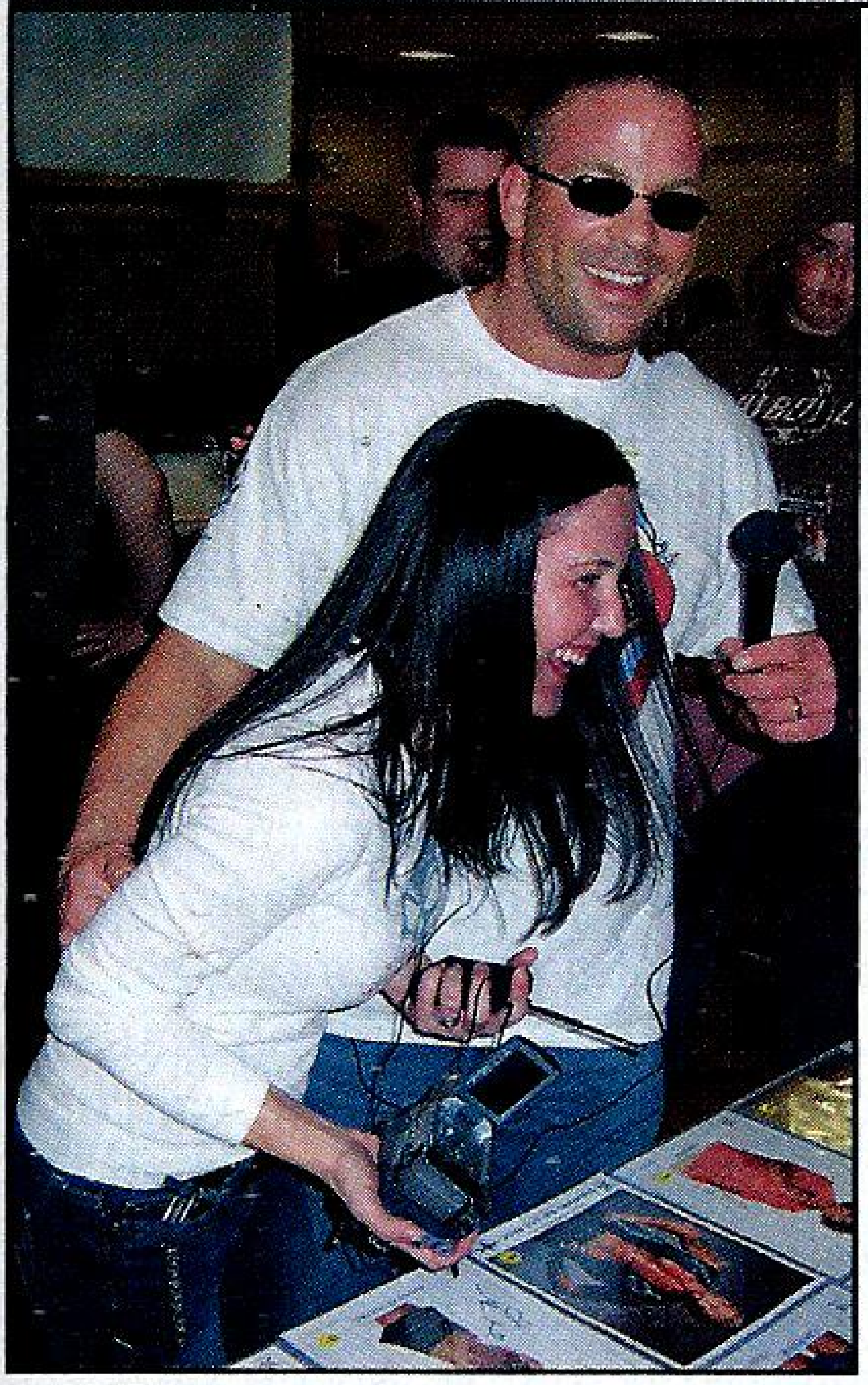


Photo by Mike Lano

***RVD-TV*, a webcast show available at robvandam.com, is Van Dam's newest foray into entertainment. The topics are varied and atypical for guests like Jim Neidhart and Bret Hart (above). Helping in this new venture has been Mrs. Van Dam, Sonya. While Sonya has been fighting a battle with colon cancer, the couple is refreshingly positive and optimistic (left).**

team provides great power to cope with whatever life throws at us. Our love for life is filled with wonderful memories and an unstoppable desire to have many more."

Since his departure from wrestling, RVD has kept busy with both his passion for comics and science fiction, plus his new reality show, *RVD-TV*, at robvandam.com. "Friends I've had guest on what I call my weekly reality-show have debated with me everything from capital punishment, gun control, pot, abortion, the election, raising kids, and more topics you never hear wrestlers seriously discuss," Van Dam said. "These are the issues of our times and something positive we're trying. I've had on the show Samoa Joe, Chris Masters, Bret Hart, Harley Race, Honky Tonk Man, Steve Williams, Godfather, MMA stars Justin McCulley from Inoki dojo, and more. Plus Burt Reynolds, Penny Marshall, and Lorenzo Lamas. Besides *RVD-TV*—which Sonya helps in so many ways besides filming and editing—you get my personal instructional workouts and insights to spiritual growth."

Rob's past success with his 5-Star Comic bookstore affords him annual historian appearances alongside celebs Gwyneth Paltrow and Angelina Jolie at what is considered the WrestleMania of that genre, San Diego's WonderCon convention. "I have one of the biggest collections of comic books, action figures, and anime of anyone. We have special rooms in our home—besides what I call 'Rob's Toy Room'—dedicated to Ironman, X-Men, Batman, Transformers, DC and Marvel, Star Wars, and anything comic-book and super-hero related ... Beat that, Al Snow! I started reading *Ghostrider* at six growing up in Battle Creek. During the years I had my store, we had lots of signings from friends like Bret, Rey Mysterio, and Booker. I think I was the first to have my business before Trish and her new yoga studio, Victoria ... even Torrie Wilson and Booker's clothing stores."

Since he and Sabu were skinny kids in 1990 getting a break in Jerry Jarrett's USWA, RVD has developed an ever-growing maturity and deepening in his entire being that goes well beyond the yin/yang symbols airbrushed on his tights. He's been heavier into meditation and reflection since taking his WWE leave. "I've always been spiritual and into lots more than achieving Zen," he said. "We feel we've lived several lifetimes. I needed to take some time off because I really hadn't stopped since I started."

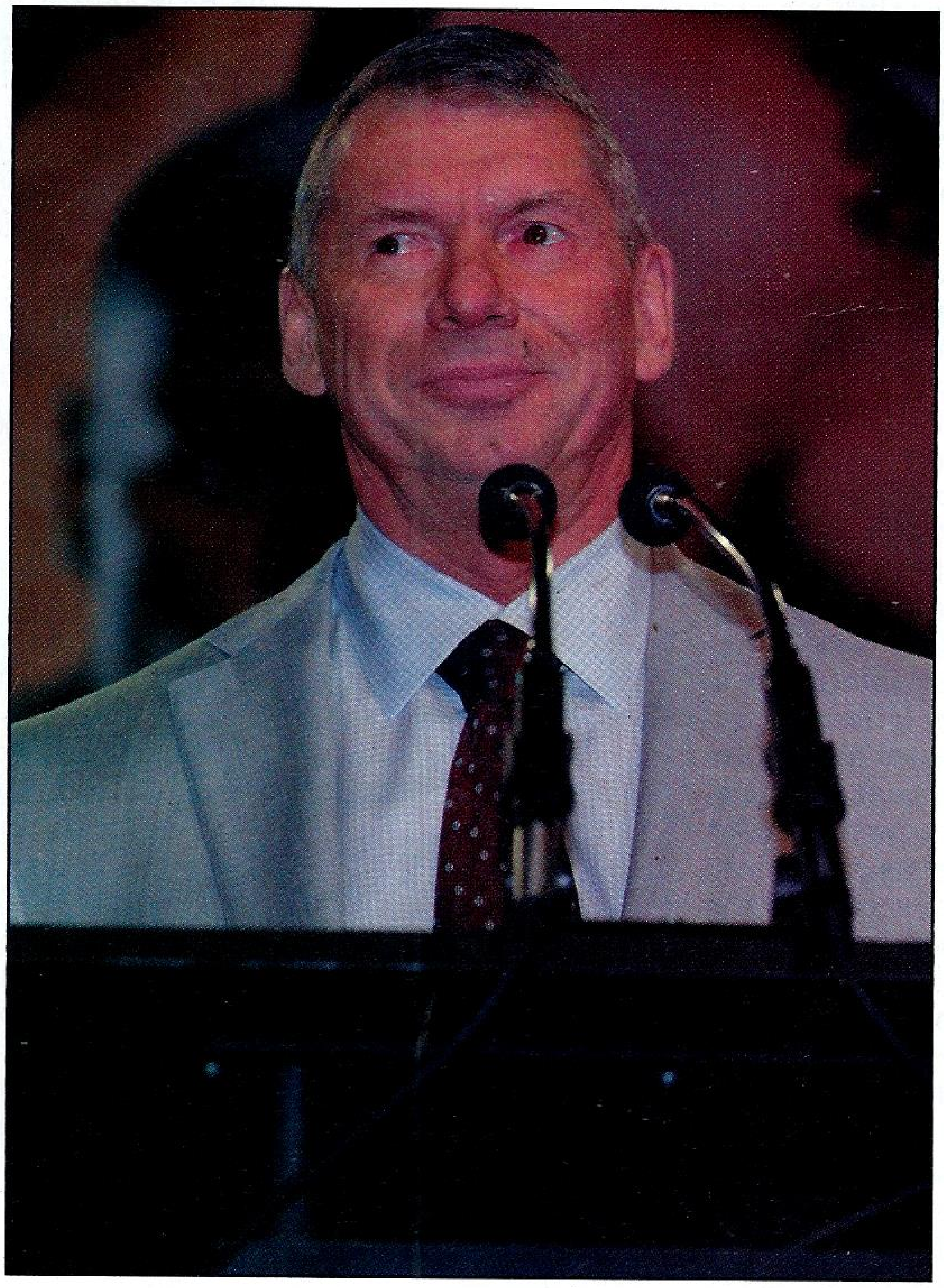
But the 37-year-old does see a future for himself wrestling. "I'll briefly test the waters, wrestling in Spain for the new NWE promotion there ... and then back home. I've helped Warrior prepare for his big match on the same cards with Orlando Jordan. I impersonated Warrior in a skit we did for *RVD-TV* and then he came up behind me, Thesz-style. Humor like that helps us get through this thing. Right now, however, my life is just about getting Sonya's health back and spending every possible moment with her. '*Imitated often, intimidated never*' has been my longtime mantra. And now it's Sonya's, too!" □

plain speaking

With Matt Brock

Harder than nails, veteran wrestling reporter Matt Brock has logged more miles covering wrestling than any other journalist. Every month Matt will travel to the sport's hotbeds, reporting everything he sees without fear or favor

DENVER, CO: Vince McMahon Jr. made the supposedly shocking announcement that he'd be giving away $1-million of his own money on Raw, and people reacted as if something spectacular had happened. Back in the old days, Junior would have been what was known as a "carney," and what he was doing would have been looked upon as a cheap (but monetarily expensive) attempt at grabbing attention. The idea that McMahon is giving out $1-million of his own money begs the question, "Who else's money is he supposed to be giving away?" There's no logical answer to that one. The reason he's doing it? Attention. Desperation. A ratings grab. Pick one because those are the only reasons. ¶There was a time, of course, when wrestling was the main show, but that was long before McMahon Jr. got his hands on the show, and that was a long time ago—back in the early-1980s when Hulkamania was on the rise. Not surprisingly, McMahon's million-dollar announcement overshadowed his announcement that he'd be bringing back the WWE draft, so right there we had proof that McMahon, if nothing else, knows how to steal the headlines from himself. Fine, Let him do it. Meanwhile, the rest of us will try to watch a wrestling match or two, if Junior and his gang will let us.



VINCE McMAHON

DES MOINES, IA: I've seen a few talented wrestlers in my day, and for my money, Batista is right up there with the best of them. No, I'm not sitting here and telling you that he is the best or that he would've passed muster in a time when Ric Flair, Harley Race, and Dusty Rhodes ruled the world. I'm just telling you that when he puts his mind to it and stays on track, Batista is a damn good wrestler, worthy of ranking right up there, if you want to do that sort of thing. Batista beat MVP in a stretcher match, and as far as I'm concerned, it didn't matter what happened between Batista and Shawn Michaels at One Night Stand because with so many feuds swirling around him, what Batista does in any one match doesn't really amount to a hill of beans in the big picture, if you get my drift. ¶The fact is that Batista could and should be the number-one wrestler in the world, bar none, and if he puts his mind to it, he will be. And if he doesn't, we'll have another Rick Steamboat on our hands—a guy who for some reason didn't achieve all he should have with all the talent God gave him ... if you believe in that sort of thing. I know I do, at least lately.

MIAMI, FL: Caught this on the news the other day. Read it at your own risk: "Brooke Hogan is carrying on what appears to be a family tradition for the Hogan family with yet another automobile accident. The blonde daughter of former WWE champion wrestler and now the host of *American Gladiators* Hulk Hogan was involved in a head-on car crash in Florida. Her brother, Nick Hogan, is serving time for a violent car crash from last year." Police said the accident was not her fault. Apparently, the driver of the other car lost control and hit her head on. ¶Fine. It wasn't her fault. It's good to hear that. But it seems as if the children of Hulk Hogan are having as much difficulty avoiding trouble as "The Hulkster" himself had avoiding success, which is not much at all. ¶Two choices here: Either the Hogan kids stop driving, or their father drives them everywhere, because that seems to be the only way they'll avoid trouble—serious or otherwise. The bleeding hearts will tell you it's a shame, that living in the shadow of a famous father isn't always easy, and that if it had been any other kid, the accident wouldn't have even made the news. The realists will tell you that being the child of Hulk Hogan is a lot easier than being the child of some working-class schlub who has to work 60 hours a week just to put food on the table. So don't shed any tears for Brooke and Nick Hogan. But if you have the chance, and care in the least, you might want to say a prayer for their good health ... if you're into such things. Lately, I am.

Photo by Michael Cairns

BROOKE HOGAN

NEW YORK, NY: Went to the doctor the other day. What he told me was that my chances of survival were 50 percent, which also told me, without him saying so, that my chances of dying were 50 percent because I don't know of any option other than those two. Prostate cancer, if you need to know, although at my age, it seems the chances of living another year are never much better than 70/30. ¶So I'm going to take the good with the bad. "It's treatable," he said, "but it's going to take some time." Fine. If he wants to give me the time, I'm willing to use some of it to keep myself alive. So, the prayer thing. This should explain it. □

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At a time when regaining the Smackdown World championship should be the only thing on his mind, Batista is obsessed with the most meaningless feud of his career

Batista

How Ric Flair Is Destroying His Career

By Dave Rosenbaum

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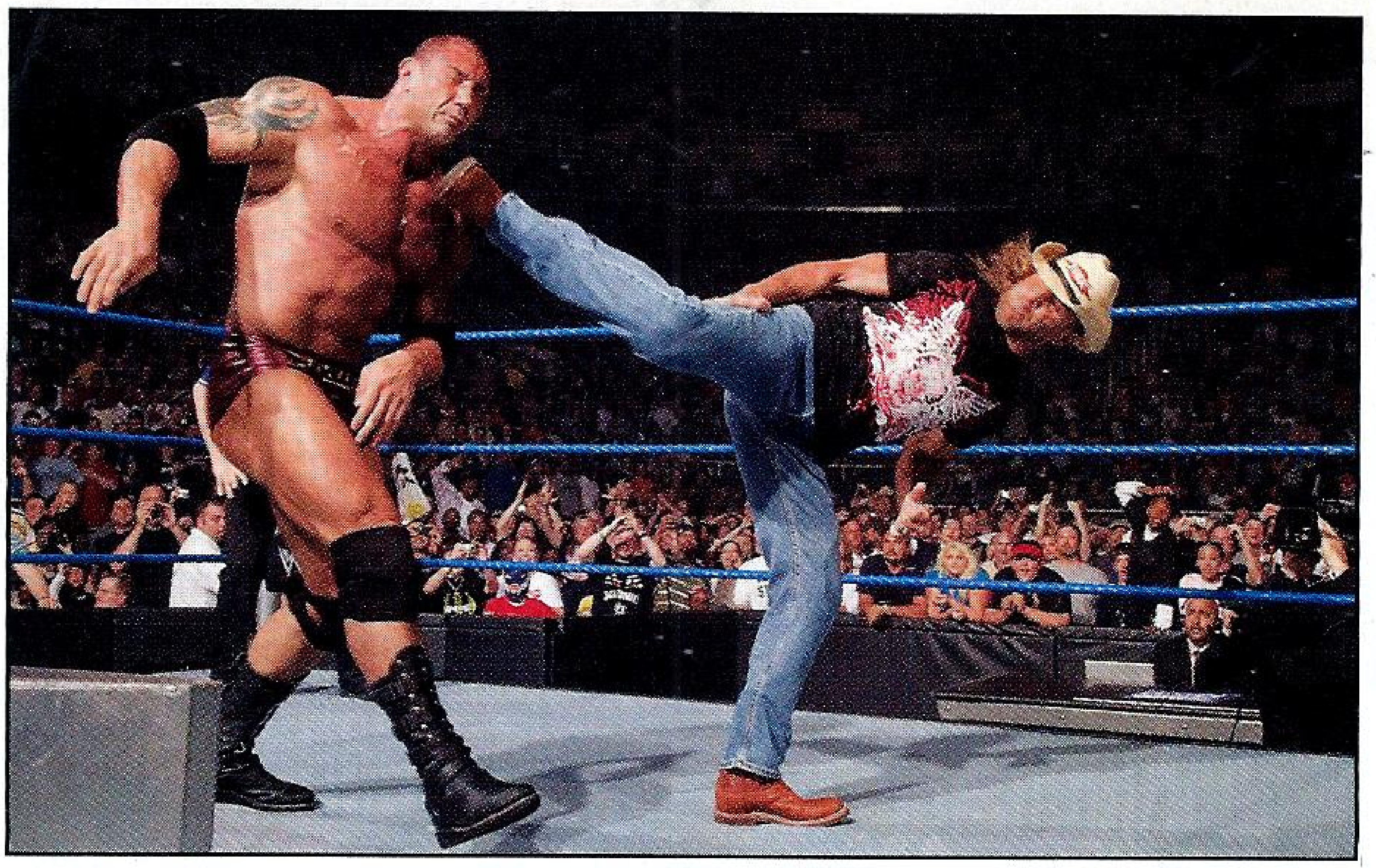
IT WAS, BY any measure, Batista's lost weekend. A lost weekend that seemed inevitable before it even started.

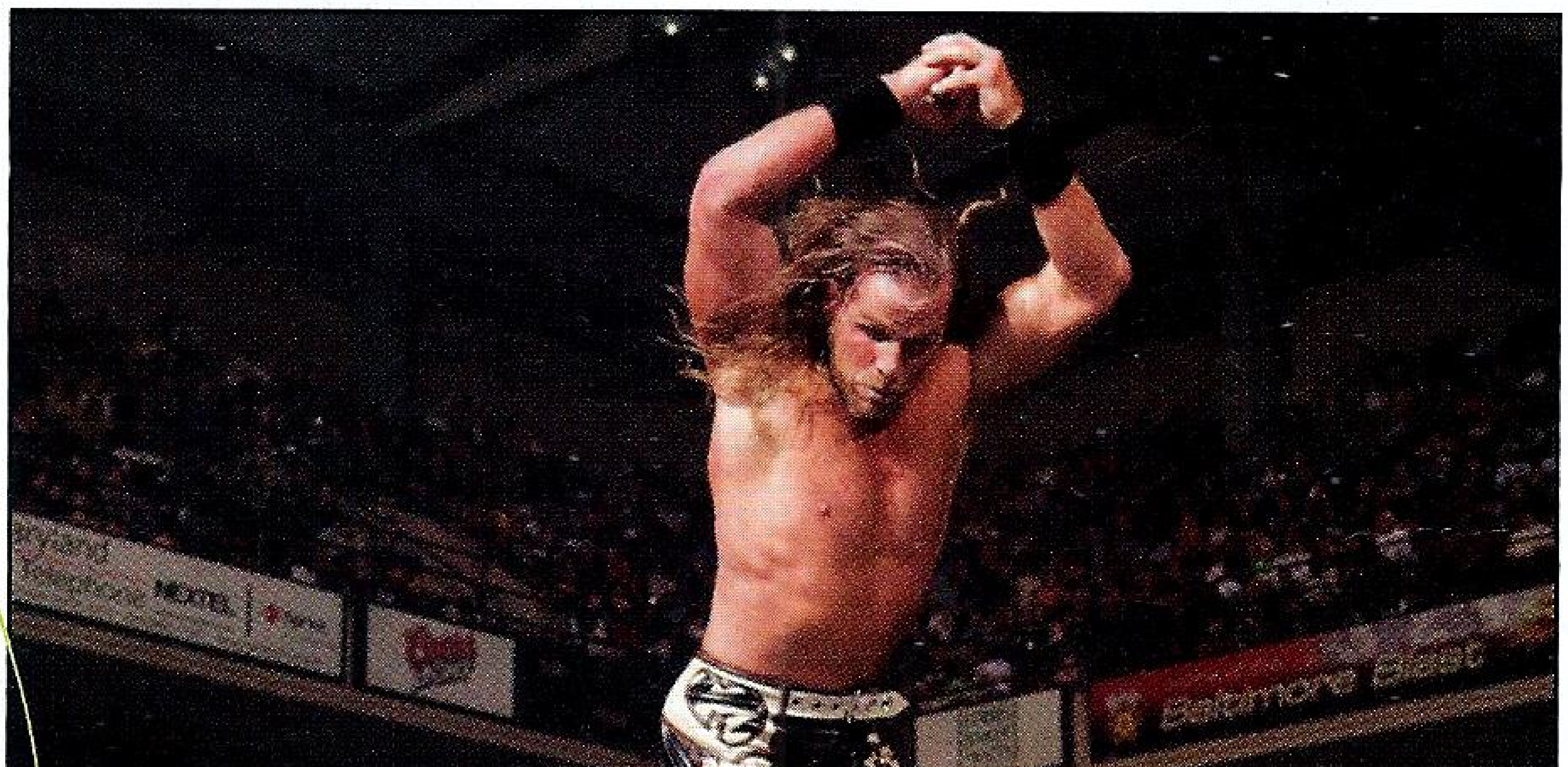
Perhaps some, maybe Batista's super-optimists, might have looked upon the weekend of April 25, 2008, as a chance for Batista to make history. At Smackdown on Friday night, he had a match against Smackdown World champion The Undertaker. And on Sunday night at Backlash, he'd have the chance to settle a score with Shawn Michaels.

But something about the weekend seemed doomed for Batista, and it wasn't just a feeling harbored by those knowledgeable about wrestling and Batista himself. The smart money had Batista losing both matches, and the smart money turned out to be right.

On Friday night, Batista lost to The Undertaker, thanks in part to Shawn Michaels' interference. And two nights later at Backlash, interference by Chris Jericho enabled the "Heartbreak Kid" to down



Two intense matches in the same weekend ensured that Batista would lose both. First, on the April 25 episode of Smackdown, Batista lost a title match against Smackdown World champ The Undertaker, thanks in part to Shawn Michaels' superkick (above). Then Michaels handed Batista another loss in the grudge match at Backlash (below).



Batista in an outstanding match.

Batista apologists (and perhaps Batista himself) will argue that he should have won both matches, and might have if not for interference. But their apologies fail to answer one important question:

What the hell was Batista doing wrestling a world title match and a major pay-per-view grudge match in the same weekend?

And the answer is very simple: Ric Flair.

Batista's obsession with Michaels winning the retirement match against Flair is threatening to destroy his career at the very point when it should be soaring, at a time when he should be focusing on regaining the Smackdown World championship, which he has held three times previously and is perfectly capable of winning again.

But, of course, after Batista's lost weekend, he wasn't focusing on The Undertaker. He wasn't obsessing over his lost chance to win the Smackdown title. He was still focusing on Michaels.

"Shawn, for your sake, I hope you are actually hurt," Batista said, referring to rumors that Michaels faked an injury at Backlash. "Because if you're not, when I see you, you will be."

Batista's obsessive behavior regarding Michaels does not surprise many in WWE who have known him (and feuded with him) for a long time. Triple-H, Batista's longtime rival, said, "That's just Dave being Dave. He's a nutcase who can't control his own actions. The only times he ever does what's best for himself is by mistake. Otherwise, he's a loose cannon."

And Flair, one of Batista's biggest supporters, said, "He'd be doing himself a big favor if he just put this whole thing with Shawn to rest. It doesn't make any sense. I've absolved Shawn of any guilt several times, but that doesn't seem to sink in with Batista. He has his own agenda and he's going to keep following it, even if it leads him to his doom."

"*Even if it leads him to his doom.*" Like an addict, Batista doesn't seem

DON'T MISS PWI UPDATE WITH FRANK INGIOSI

EXCLUSIVELY ON: pwi-online.com

Pro Wrestling Illustrated Senior Writer Frank Ingiosi is insightful, provocative, and downright funny! You've read "The Trade's Mark" in *PWI.* Now check out Frank's column, "The Turn," every Friday afternoon.

Ingiosi on Mark Henry: "We've tried channeling our angst as a way to hopefully motivate Mark. You know, Internet-column tough love and whatnot. But, alas, our desires were met with more mediocrity and disappointment. At the very least we hoped Mark would ditch his angry image and just return to the always-lovable 'Sexual Chocolate'-style ways. Sadly, there would be no chocolate for us, sexual or otherwise."

Ingiosi on Jeff Hardy turning 30: "From all of us at "The Turn," happy birthday, Jeff. Keep up the great work. We wanted to get you something, but apparently there isn't a Cameron-area orthopedic surgeon that sells gift certificates."

Ingiosi on "Pacman" Jones in TNA: "Now we're left with a tag team in which one man can wrestle and the other's greatest contribution is taking his shirt off and scurrying around the ring goading his opponents into easily avoided situations. Does it work? No. Is it a draw? Can't imagine that it is. Is it insulting to the fans? Probably to some, yet they still go nuts for Team Pacman each time they enter the Impact Zone."

Frank Ingiosi ... on pwi-online.com!

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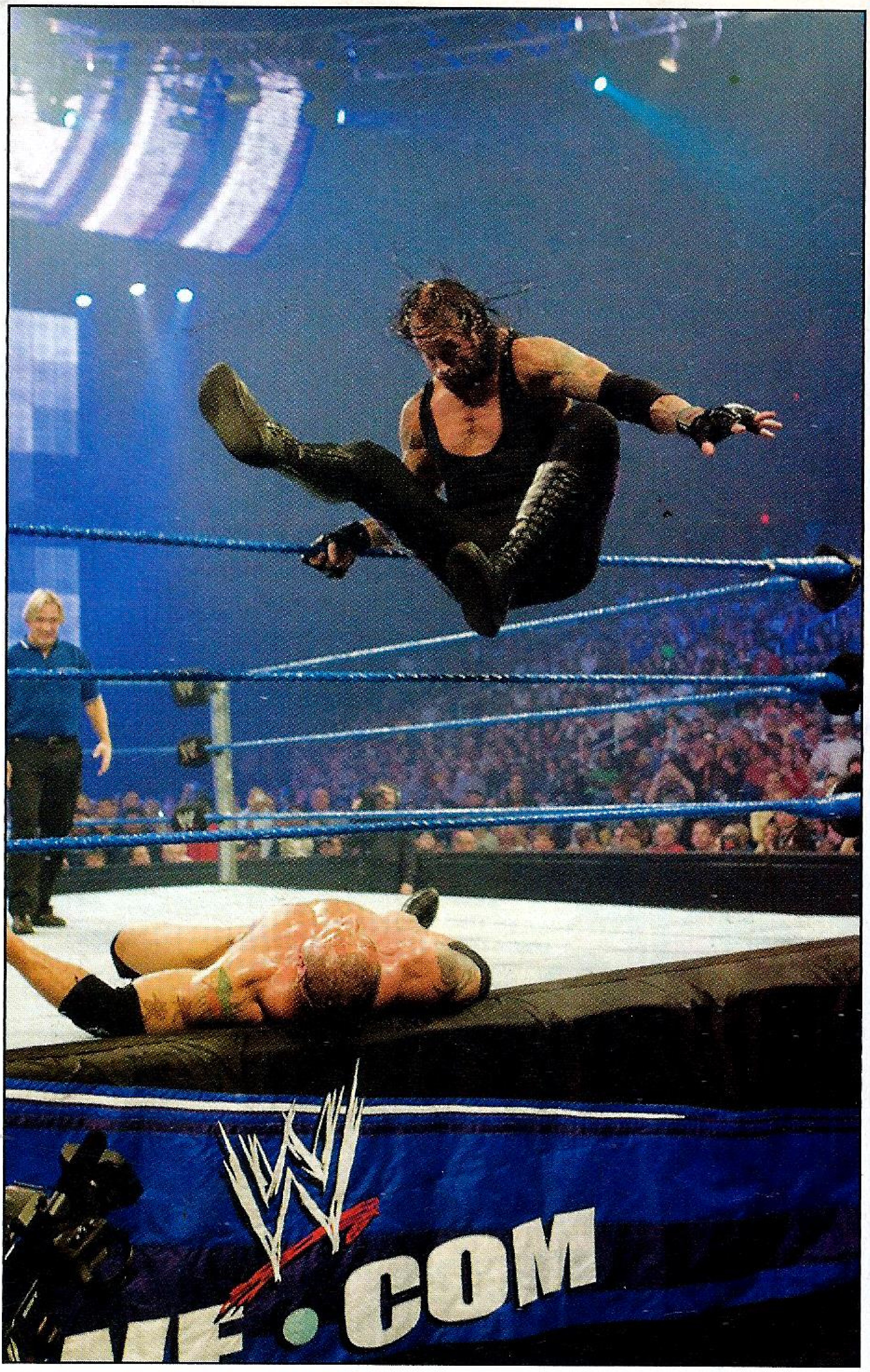


Batista is a champion-caliber star—no doubt about it. His championship record proves it. But during Batista's Smackdown World title match on April 25, "The Animal" wasn't focused on the belt (or on 'Taker); he was distracted by a pointless match he would be fighting against Michaels at Backlash.

to be considering his future as he feeds his inner monster. He seems to think that settling his score with Michaels—even though most people agree that Batista shouldn't have a score to settle—is more important than winning the Smackdown World title. Yet, he is intent on fighting two battles when even fighting just one of those two battles would tax the limits of most wrestlers.

"I've said it over and over, and I'll say it one more time because I hope it'll sink into that thick skull of his," Flair said. "I don't need him to do anything for me. Shawn Michaels did exactly what I asked him to do: He gave me the match of my life, the test I needed. I didn't pass that test, but that's okay. I needed to take the test, even if I didn't ace it. Now Dave Batista has to take care of his own life. He's proven everything he needs to prove to me and impressed me every step of the way. He's won gold and come back from injury, stood up for friends. But this is one friend who doesn't need defending. If he keeps up this hero act, he's going to shoot himself in the foot."

Flair's forewarning is a real possibility based on the facts of the situation:

Fact: Batista has nothing to gain from his feud with Michaels.

Fact: Flair is a part of wrestling's past. Batista still has a great future.

Fact: Great futures have gone to hell because of bad decisions and misguided feuds.

Now it's time for Batista to face the facts.

"Once you've won a world title, winning another one is all that ever matters," Flair said, "and if it isn't, it should be. I was successful because champion was the only thing I wanted to be, and if I got distracted by something, I made sure I got myself back on track as quickly as possible. That's the only message I've got for Batista, short of smacking him across the head."

Right now a smack across the head might do him some good. While commentator Jim Ross isn't volunteering for the job, he has some strong advice for Batista.

"Battling Undertaker for the championship is a full-time job," said Ross, WWE's former director of talent relations. "Battling a wrestling legend like Shawn Michaels is also a full-time job. Each of these tasks requires all of a wrestler's energy and focus. There's no room for distractions. Winning one of these feuds would be difficult, though doable for a man with Batista's ability. Winning both feuds is darn near impossible, and I don't care who the wrestler is. Andre the Giant couldn't have done it."

What does Batista have to say about this? Not much. We asked what's more important, winning the Smackdown World heavyweight championship or embarrassing Michaels. He said, "That's a stupid question." Pressed further, he said, "I'm gonna do both." Told that even Flair thought that was an impossible task, Batista said, "I'm gonna make Ric proud." □

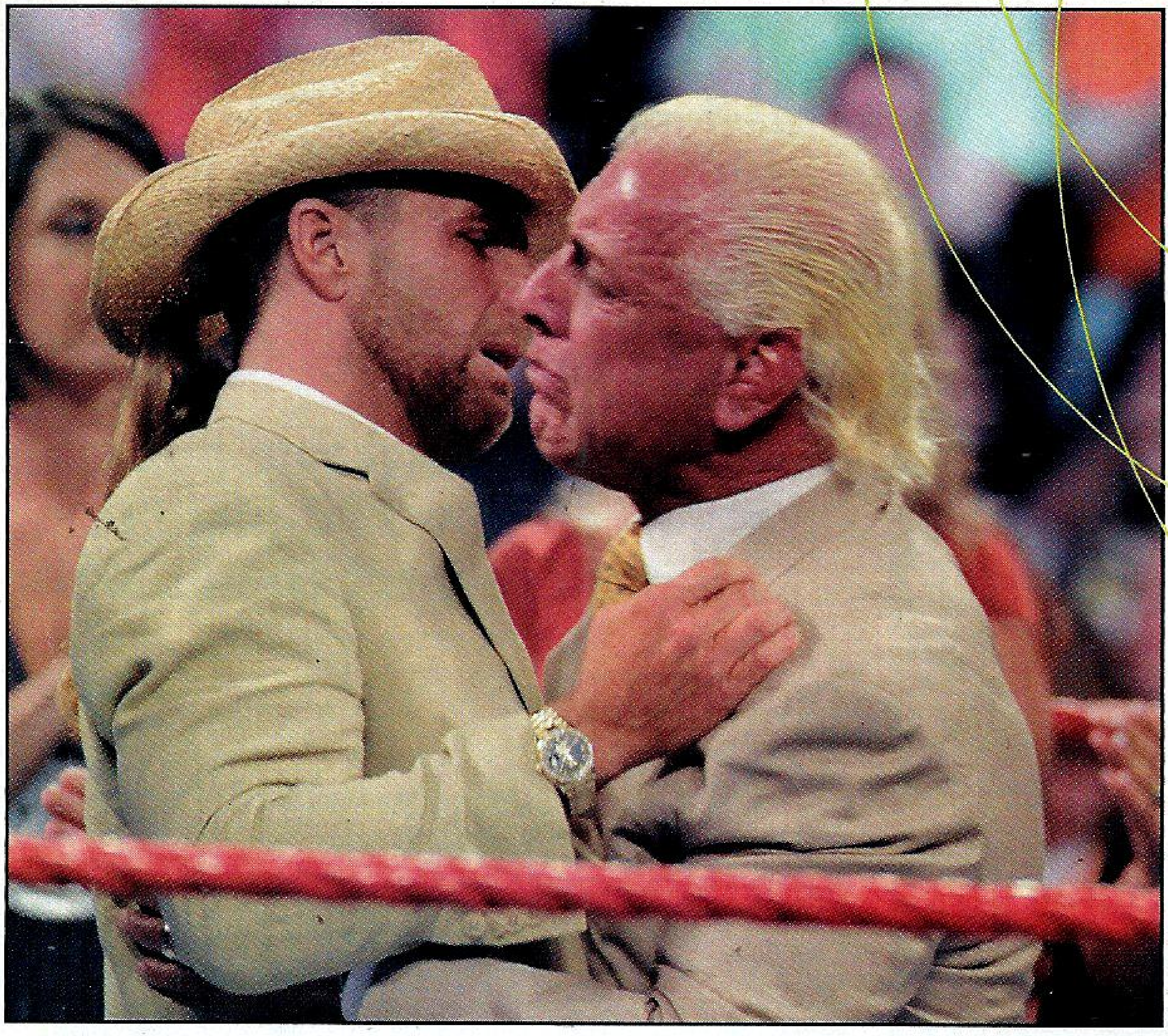
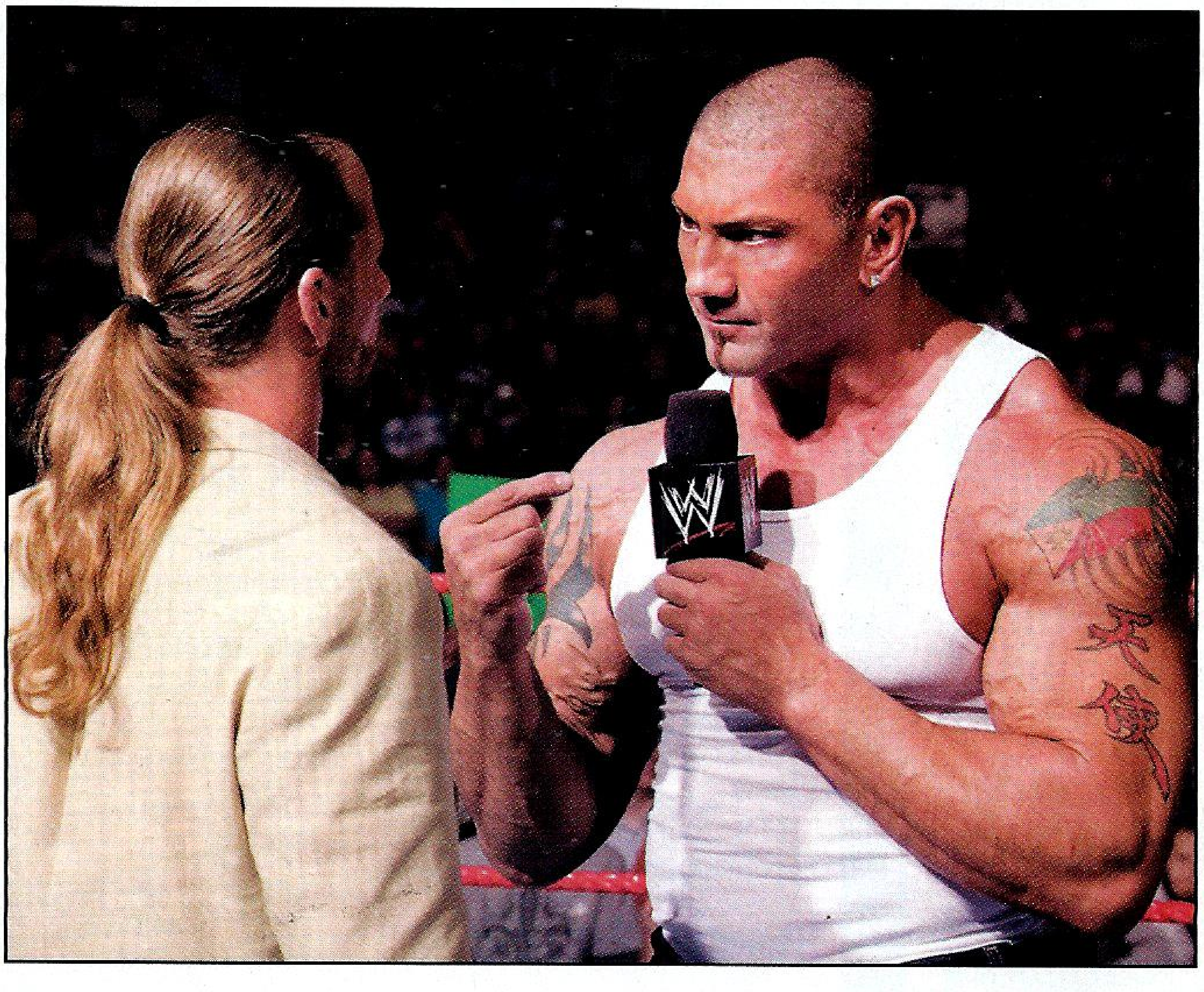


Photo by George Napolitano

Batista is defending the honor of a man who doesn't want a hero. Ric Flair has already absolved Michaels of any blame in ending his career at WM24 (above). So isn't it about time Batista stepped down from his own fight with Michaels (below)?



ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

Section Compiled by Al Castle

WITH RING OF Honor being the distant third largest national wrestling promotion behind WWE and TNA, the reality is that most mainstream wrestling fans have never even heard of ROH's biggest stars—the Nigel McGuinnesses, Bryan Danielsons, and Briscoes of the company.

And so imagine being a relatively obscure performer in a relatively obscure company. For certain, accolades can be elusive for ROH's lower and mid-card talent. But a fly on the wall of the ROH locker room would likely hear few complaints. For many of ROH's up-and-coming talent, the honor of earning a spot in a promotion heralded by some for revolutionizing the wrestling industry can be reward enough.

But regardless of what fans owe ROH's future champions, you—the wrestling fan—owe it to yourself to be aware of the 10 performers profiled in this section.

Yes, today they may be jerking the curtain in the opening match of a show before just a few hundred fans. But in a few short years—or even months—they may be headliners. Indeed, some of the wrestlers featured in this special section are right on the brink of career-making performances, wrestlers like Claudio Castagnoli, who is already knocking on the door of the ROH championship, and Tyler Black, who had Ring of Honor fans buzzing from his unlikely ROH title challenge in the main event of a pay-per-view.

Others may have a longer road ahead of them. The 24-year-old former masked man, Jigsaw, may find himself a bit player in ROH now, but he is slowly showing the tools to be much more.

Motivating these wrestlers to plow ahead is ROH's reputation as a land of opportunity. Where Jimmy Wang Yang and Curry Man may not be well served holding their breath for their next title shot, a chance for championship glory may not be so farfetched for ROH's supporting cast. In fact, of the 10 wrestlers profiled here, seven have previously received ROH title shots.

More than merely highlighting each wrestler's upside, this section also attempts to pinpoint what may be keeping them from moving to the next level in ROH. Offering their expert analysis are various stars and officials from ROH, including Bryan Danielson, Larry Sweeney, and reigning ROH champion Nigel McGuinness.

So read ahead, and study the faces of these 10 wrestlers. In a few years, theirs might be household names.

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: The newly unmasked junior member of ROH's acrobatic hip-hoppers, The Vulture Squad

AMBITION: To shatter his former reputation as just another luchador wannabe and help transform the Squad into serious tag team championship contenders

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "Just like the name says, I am that final piece of the puzzle that will help The Vulture Squad capture the ROH tag team belts in its talons and fly into the sunset."

ANALYSIS: When Jigsaw pulled off his trademark mask during a February edition of ROH's Internet Videowire, it was more than just a symbolic gesture. Underneath the colorful disguise was the deadly serious face of a driven young wrestler, and he wanted not only his opponents to see that side of him, but his partners as well.

"I gotta admit, part of me wondered if Jigsaw was really down with the program—if he had the killer instinct necessary to go all the way in Ring of Honor," said Vulture Squad manager Julius Smokes. "But when he pulled off that mask, and I looked in that cat's eyes, I knew he wasn't playin'."

Photo by George Tahinos

Jigsaw shed his trademark puzzle piece mask to show his team loyalty; the change has revealed the stone-faced competitor Jigsaw's opponents never saw coming, particularly Hangman 3. Jigsaw rolls up B.J. Whitmer for the pin on March 16 in Philadelphia.

Indeed, for too long Jigsaw's superhero getup may have served to hide an earnest contender with the tools to climb up the ROH ladder. The lean and lanky 6'2" New Yorker made his wrestling debut in 2002 and cut his teeth working in various northeastern independent promotions, including Combat Zone Wrestling, where he wore the promotion's junior heavyweight championship for seven months.

It was in CHIKARA where Jigsaw received his training and developed his mysterious character, complete with a puzzle piece emblazoned on his mask. He went on to win the promotion's prestigious King of Trios tournament in 2007 with Shane Storm and his trainer, Mike Quackenbush.

It was also in 2007 that Jigsaw became a regular in Ring of Honor, where he initially competed in card-opening matches and had only limited success. But despite his win/loss record, Jigsaw's combination of heavyweight height and cruiserweight speed caught the eye of not only fans, but of Smokes, who was looking to get back into the managing game after his previous charge, Homicide, left for TNA.

Smokes recruited world-class aerialist Jack Evans and CZW standout Ruckus into his fold, and then rounded out the group with Jigsaw. The urban-edged faction was dubbed The Vulture Squad.

The honeymoon period was short-lived for Jigsaw, who was called upon to carry a heavier load in the group when Evans went down to injury. He teamed with Ruckus and ultimately earned a tag team title shot against the No Remorse Corps at an April event in New York City.

Despite a spirited showing by the Squad, the challengers lost the match. Ruckus and Smokes later blamed the loss on Jigsaw, and encouraged him to shed his mask to show his commitment to the team and to winning. After some hesitation, Jigsaw complied—and in doing so earned the trust and respect of his partners.

While losing the mask may have helped Jigsaw show a different side, it did not necessarily help him win more matches. Despite a dazzling arsenal both on the mat and in the air, including the head-crushing Jig-N-Tonic, 24-year-old Jigsaw may have a way to go before he makes his mark in ROH. But the pieces are certainly starting to come into place.

JIGSAW

Photo by Gilda Pasquil

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Smash-mouth Ring of Honor heavyweight and perennial contender for the Full Impact Pro heavyweight title

AMBITION: To continue to fight the good fight against cocky rulebreakers like the members of Sweet & Sour Inc. and The No Remorse Corps; to recapture the FIP heavyweight title and earn another ROH title shot

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "I've been in love with this business since the day I watched The Road Warriors drive a spike into Dusty Rhodes' eye. Today, I'm handing out the same kind of punishment in the greatest wrestling company in the world—Ring of Honor. The only thing missing is some gold around my waist."

ANALYSIS: At six feet tall and 230 pounds, Erick Stevens stands out as a true heavyweight in a land populated by smaller wrestlers. But while Stevens may pack a lot of power into his broad frame, make no mistake—it's his wrestling skill set that has made him a natural fit in ROH.

Stevens, who made his pro debut in 2003, came to ROH last year after being a standout in its sister promotion Full Impact Pro, as well as competing in other southern indies. Just months into his ROH career, Austin Aries recruited the newcomer to be a member of his startup stable, The Resilience.

With teammates Aries and Matt Cross, Stevens engaged in a lengthy and heated rivalry with the members of The No Remorse Corps—including Stevens' former trainer, Roderick Strong.

"A lot of people wondered why I'd choose a relative newcomer like Erick to help me take on such a dominant faction of wrestlers like the NRC," Aries said. "But from the day I first saw Erick, I knew he was something special. Not only did he have the makings of a great partner, but also the potential to be a great leader one day."

Fans instantly bought into Stevens' dominating power and high-impact offense. Delivering thunderous chops to his opponents' chest and muscling them into innovative power moves—including his gutwrench power bomb finisher—Stevens stringed together an impressive record in his early months in ROH, and before long found himself challenging Takeshi Morishima for the ROH title.

The Sarasota, Florida, native came up short in his title shot, but by no means was his ROH freshman year a bust. After Aries disbanded The Resilience, Stevens went out on his own, and in December achieved a career milestone when he defeated Strong for the FIP heavyweight championship.

During a six-week reign, Stevens picked up some impressive victories against top ROH stars such as Aries and Bryan Danielson. Over the next several months, Stevens would take on the role of one of the standard-bearers, defending ROH's tradition of respect against brash rulebreakers like Larry Sweeney and his Sweet & Sour Inc. He also took on ROH champion Nigel McGuinness in April, but came up short after having his arm injured by Strong.

Stevens may still be a couple of years away from finally capturing the big one—the ROH title. An explosive in-ring style tends to come with explosive emotions—and Stevens needs to rein in his temper if he is to focus on the bigger picture. But with his power, wrestling ability, and commitment to improve, Stevens remains a serious contender to any singles title.

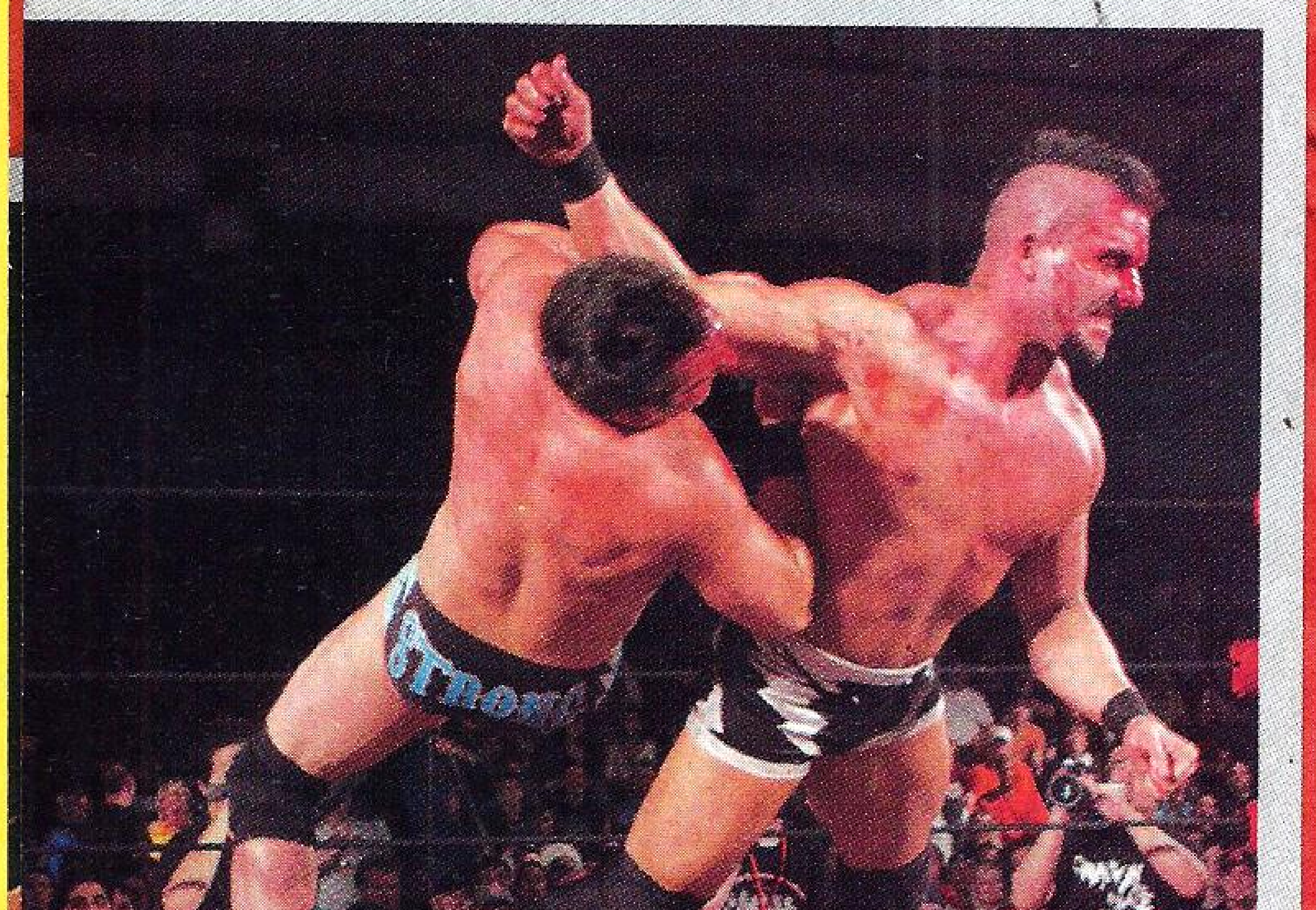


Photo by George Tahinos

Thanks to his size, "Explosive" Erick Stevens can dominate most opponents, making the ROH newcomer a vital component in Austin Aries' Resilience stable. Stevens' lariat levels No Remorse Corps member Roderick Strong, who, coincidently, trained Stevens prior to meeting again in Ring of Honor.

ERICK STEVENS

Photo by Jake Sposetta

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Popular Swiss heavyweight and ROH mid-card standout caught up in a lengthy feud with Larry Sweeney's Sweet & Sour Inc.

AMBITION: To settle an old score with Chris Hero and the other members of Sweet & Sour Inc, and to contend for Nigel McGuinness' ROH title

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "I have come long way to get where I am, but my journey will not be not done until I climb to the highest Alps of Ring of Honor. Hey!"

ANALYSIS: It was more than a year ago that Castagnoli had packed his bags and was ready to leave his home in Ring of Honor to join WWE, where his size and skill caught the eye of scouts. But before Castagnoli could wrestle his first WWE match, he was cut.

WWE's loss was most certainly the gain of ROH and its fans.

At 6'5" and weighing more than 230 pounds, "Double-C" is one of the largest wrestlers in ROH. And even against ROH's lightning-fast cruiserweights, Castagnoli's innovative offense has made him one of the most exciting wrestlers in the company.

"The big oaf has a box of rocks for a brain, but I'll give him his due. He can do some amazing things in the ring, brother," said Castagnoli's arch-rival, Larry Sweeney.

Whereas most internationally bred wrestlers hail from pro wrestling strongholds like Mexico, Canada, and Japan, Castagnoli traces his roots back to Schaffhausen, Switzerland, where he trained under fellow Swiss wrestler SigMasta Rappo. He made his professional debut in 2000 and honed his craft in various independent wrestling promotions throughout Europe as a member of a team of bankers dubbed Swiss Money Holding.

In 2004, Castagnoli moved stateside and quickly made an impact in various northeast independent promotions, including CHIKARA, where he formed the tag team of The Kings of Wrestling with Chris Hero. So successful was the team that at one point in 2006, the Kings held tag team titles in three major independent promotions, including ROH.

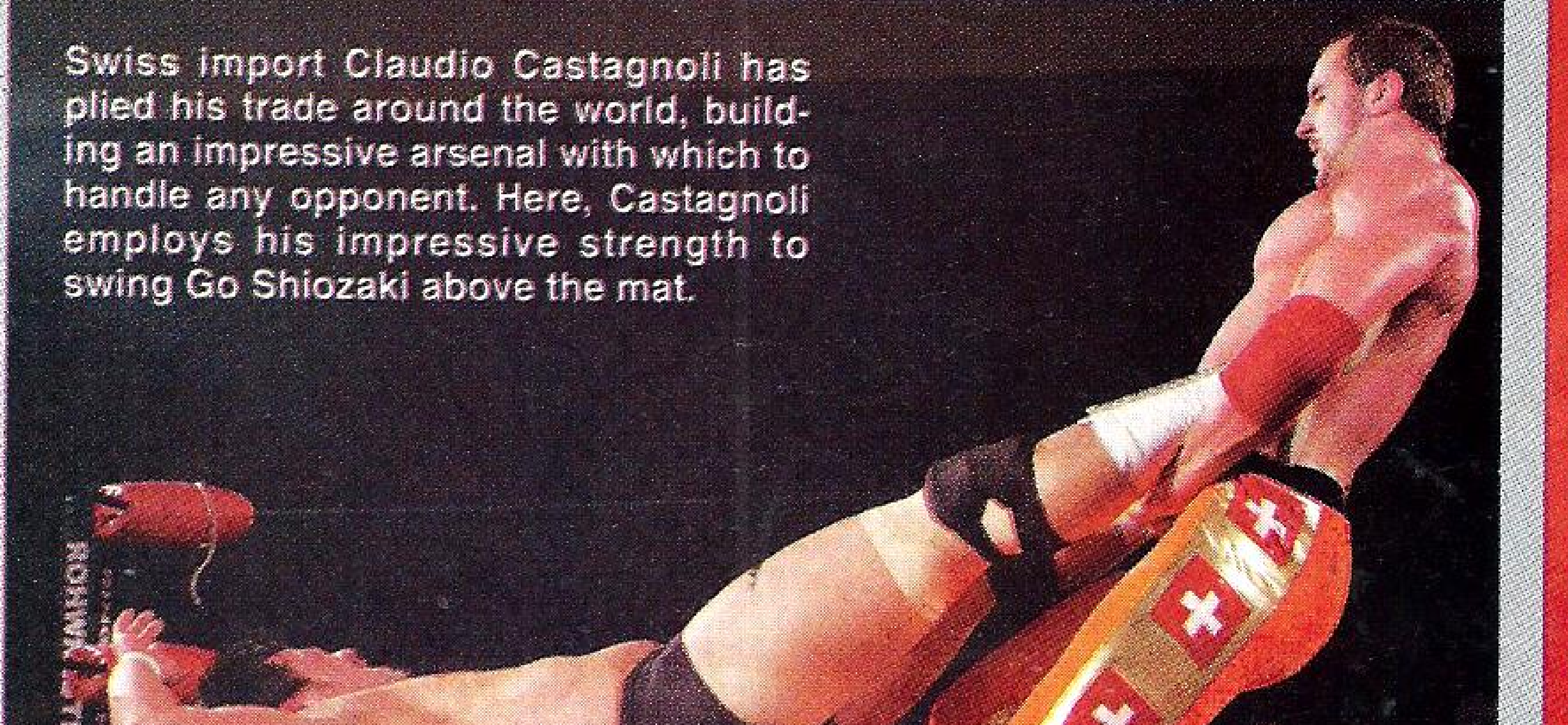
But after The Kings of Wrestling dropped the ROH tag straps in 2006, their bond quickly crumbled. Hero turned his back on his towering partner and took up with Sweeney as one of the founding members of Sweet & Sour Inc.

While Hero's betrayal hurt Castagnoli, it also motivated him to make it on his own. And make it he did. In 2007, Castagnoli won a 16-man, two-night "Race To The Top" tournament to earn an ROH title shot. He came up short in his challenge to then-champion Takeshi Morishima, but proved he had what it took to be a serious contender for ROH's top singles title.

Castagnoli has frequently revisited ROH's main event scene, even getting another title shot against ROH champion Nigel McGuinness. But he still has unfinished business in battling Sweeney's ever-expanding stable, which has time and again sought to humiliate Castagnoli.

When the day comes that Castagnoli finally gets Sweeney out of his hair and can focus his energy on winning some gold, whoever the ROH champion may be at the time better beware. Castagnoli's high-impact, European-inspired offense—which features his finisher the Ricola bomb—makes up only a small part of a varied and innovative repertoire.

With his awesome power, height, and technique, Castagnoli has more tools than a Swiss Army knife, and is a good bet to one day wear the ROH championship.



Swiss import Claudio Castagnoli has plied his trade around the world, building an impressive arsenal with which to handle any opponent. Here, Castagnoli employs his impressive strength to swing Go Shiozaki above the mat.

Photo by George Tahinos

CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI

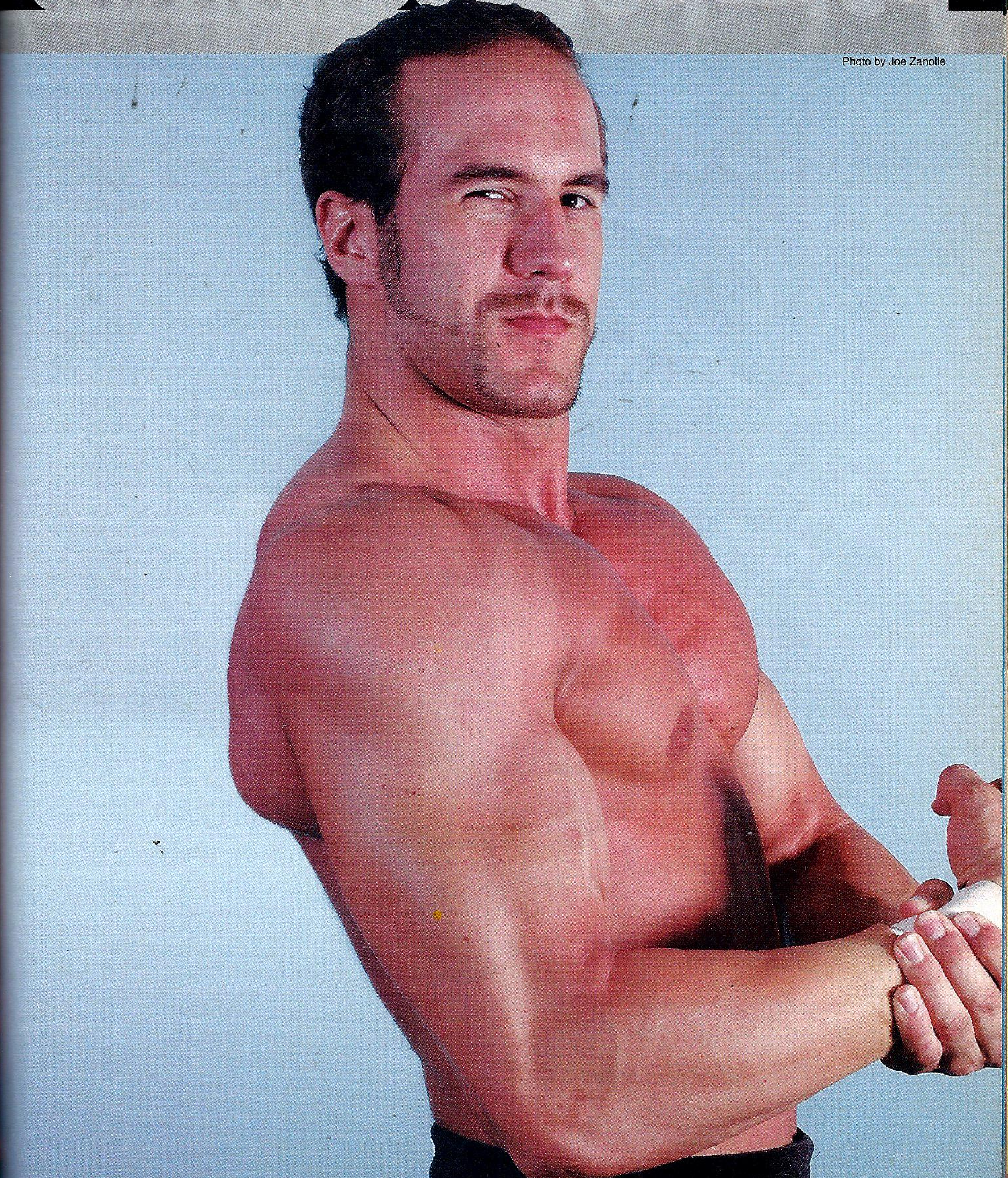


Photo by Joe Zanolle

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Sinister lower card agitator constantly looking for a new way to manipulate his foes and allies

AMBITION: To find the same success in ROH that he has in the NWA, where he wears the promotion's heavyweight championship; to be part of a stable of wrestlers that can carry out his dirty work, and help him compete for ROH gold

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "There's that old saying about nice guys finishing last. Well, maybe that's why 'Scrap Iron' is always first to the finish line. I don't care if you like me. I don't care if you hate me. I'm the very best in this sport today, and I've got the NWA championship around my waist to prove it."

ANALYSIS: Buddy Rogers. Harley Race. Ric Flair. Adam Pearce.

One of those names may seem out of place, but the fact is that "Scrap Iron" Adam Pearce today wears the same NWA heavyweight championship that has adorned the waists of some of the greatest wrestlers ever to step foot in the ring.

And so how is it that a man with such a lofty claim finds himself a bit player in Ring of Honor? Maybe it's bad timing. Maybe Pearce is missing an ingredient for success. Or maybe, it's plain old karma.

"That dude is about the biggest jerk in the whole locker room," said Vulture Squad member Ruckus—just one of the dozens and dozens of enemies Pearce has made during his three years in ROH.

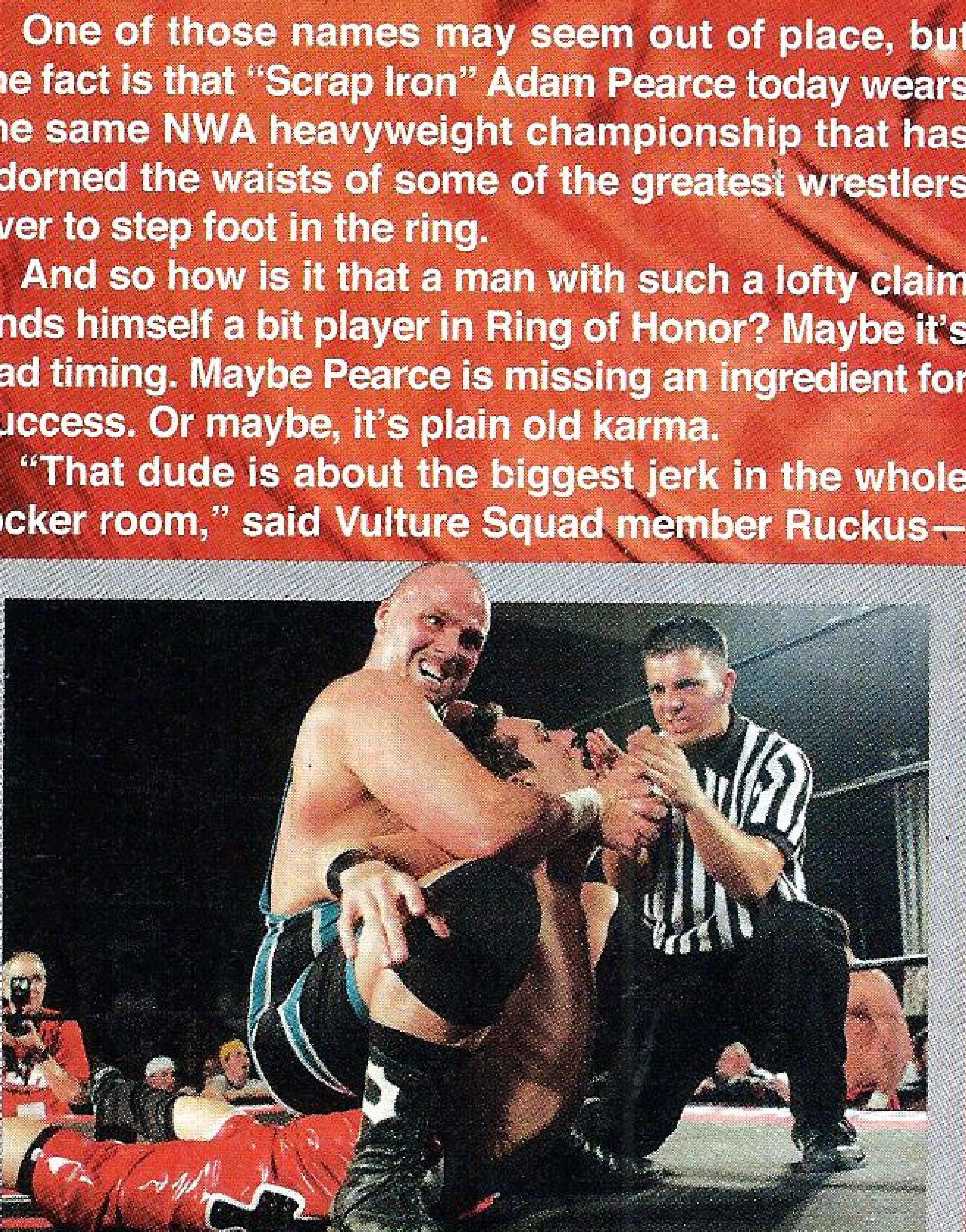


Photo by George Tahinos

With intensity etched in his face, Adam Pearce locks up Jigsaw by the chin. Pearce has all the tools to be as successful in ROH as he has been in the NWA. But his attitude might be tarnishing the fan's view of him.

Unfortunately for "Scrap Iron," his big mouth and obnoxious attitude cause people to overlook his tremendous grappling talent, verbal skills, and long resume of championships and stellar performances.

Pearce started wrestling soon after graduating from high school in Waukegan, Illinois—training under Sonny Rogers and competing in various midwestern independent promotions.

Pearce's quick grasp of wrestling fundamentals and the gift of gab quickly caught the eye of several promoters. He competed in several matches in WWE in the late-1990s under the name Adam O'Brien, and was offered (and turned down) a WCW contract.

In the years that followed, Pearce found success working for independent promotions in California, Florida, and Mexico before joining ROH in 2005. Pearce quickly found himself in the middle of ROH's now-legendary feud with rival promotion Combat Zone Wrestling. Then-ROH Commissioner Jim Cornette even deputized Pearce to serve as an authority figure in ROH. To say the power went to Pearce's his head would be quite an understatement.

Over the past two years, Pearce has predominantly been involved in mid-card feuds with Delirious and others. Having gotten a taste of power thanks to Cornette, Pearce recruited Shane Hagadorn as his manservant and hired heavyweights Brent Albright and B.J. Whitmer to fill out his faction—Hangman 3.

But after peaking in ROH in 2006 with a feud against Homicide and an ROH championship match against Bryan Danielson, Pearce has been unable to reclaim his past glory. While Pearce has shown a knack for getting others to do his bidding, he has found only sparse singles success in ROH.

Perhaps realizing that something was missing from his package, Pearce joined Larry Sweeney's Sweet & Sour Inc. in March. With his mixture of throwback wrestling basics and high-impact maneuvers, such as his torture rack power bomb finisher, it could be that all Pearce needs is a bit of direction.

At least one person seems to think that's the case.

"I surround myself with only the very best ROH has to offer, and that's certainly the case with 'Scrap Iron', baby," Sweeney told Inside Wrestling. "Soon enough, Adam's going to need to find some extra space on his mantle, because sitting right next to his NWA belt will be the ROH championship, brother!"

ADAM PEARCE

Photo by Wayne McCarty

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: A powerful, agile, and technically savvy hothead, who made a name for himself by mowing down opponents

AMBITION: To compete for ROH championship gold, both as a singles competitor and as one-half of a popular tag team with El Generico

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "ROH has been Steenalized. I've been throwing opponents all over the ring for more than a year now, and it won't be long before some gold finds itself around my waist."

ANALYSIS: No, it's not the ghost of the great Tim Woods that those Ring of Honor fans are constantly seeing. The "Mr. Wrestling" for whom they are chanting is Quebec-native Kevin Steen, who has made quite an impact in his first year in ROH.

Any man with the gumption to take on the moniker "Mr. Wrestling" better be able to deliver in the ring, and Steen certainly does that. Combining the strength of a linebacker with the agility of a luchador, Steen is one of the most innovative and dominant stars of ROH. A Kevin Steen match always begs the question, "What will he come up with this time?"

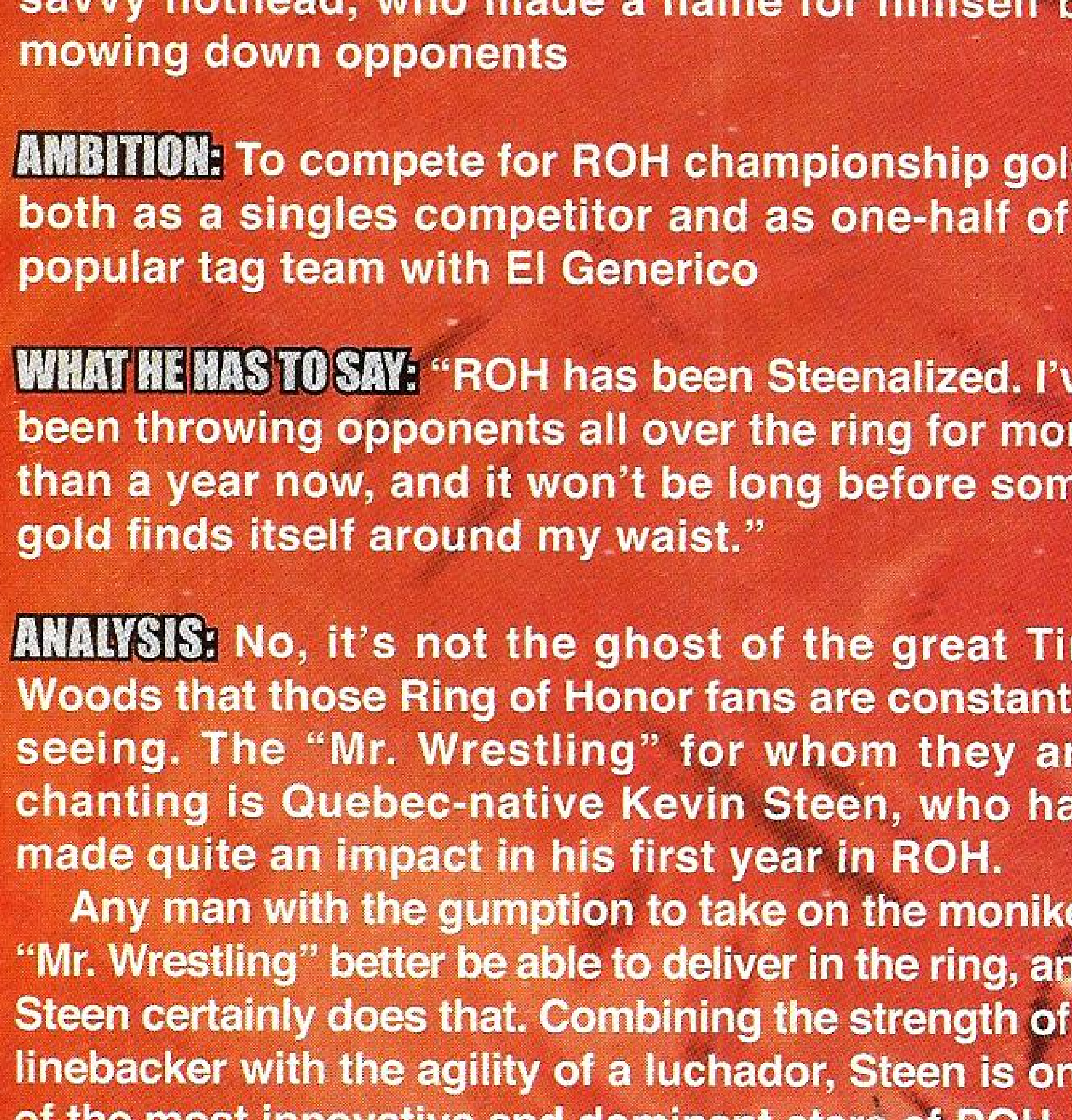


Photo by George Tahinos

Kevin Steen rolls up Roderick Strong and prepares to drive Strong into the Ring of Honor canvas. Steen is commended for his mix of power-based and aerial maneuvers. He is a strong singles wrestler and some fans fear that his team with El Generico is dragging down the promising star.

Take for example some of Steen's signature maneuvers—the aptly named go home driver maneuver, in which Steen spins an opponent, catches him at his back, and drives him into the mat; the Steenalizer, in which Steen folds his opponent into a neat little package and violently tosses him over his head; and his package piledriver, which is usually enough to finish any opponent. Steen peppers his power move set with acrobatic aerial tactics, including a graceful 450 splash and moonsault—feats that are especially remarkable considering Steen's bulk.

"You can't help but cringe when you watch Kevin toss around his opponents like rag dolls," said ROH announcer Dave Prazak. "It can really be cringe-inducing to see the punishment he dishes out in there."

Steen made his wrestling debut in 1999 and rose to dominate the Quebec-based Elite Wrestling Revolution, where he captured the heavyweight title on two occasions. Years later, he brought his unique talents to the United States and made his mark in promotions such as Combat Zone Wrestling, CHIKARA, and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla.

But it is in Ring of Honor that Steen's penchant for domination has been most apparent. Forming an unlikely alliance with the colorful cruiserweight El Generico, Steen challenged the Briscoe Brothers for their tag team championship within weeks of his arrival in ROH. What followed was one of ROH's most intense feuds of 2007, in which the two teams battled in various wild matches, culminating in a chaotic ladder match that headlined ROH's third pay-per-view, Man Up.

Still, Steen and Generico were never able to capture the belts. Steen has similarly come up short in his quest for ROH singles gold—losing to former champion, Takeshi Morishima, in October 2007, and again in a title match against current champion, Nigel McGuinness, this past April. McGuinness used some underhanded tricks to retain the title, and Steen exploded in a rage at ringside after the match's conclusion.

Steen has otherwise spent much of the first half of 2008 feuding with Adam Pearce and his lackeys, but many observers say he is capable of more. Only the future will tell what "Mr. Wrestling" needs to someday become "Mr. ROH Champion."

KEVIN STEEN

Photo by Joe Zanolle

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Hot-blooded member in good standing of ROH's brash young stable of villains, The No Remorse Corps

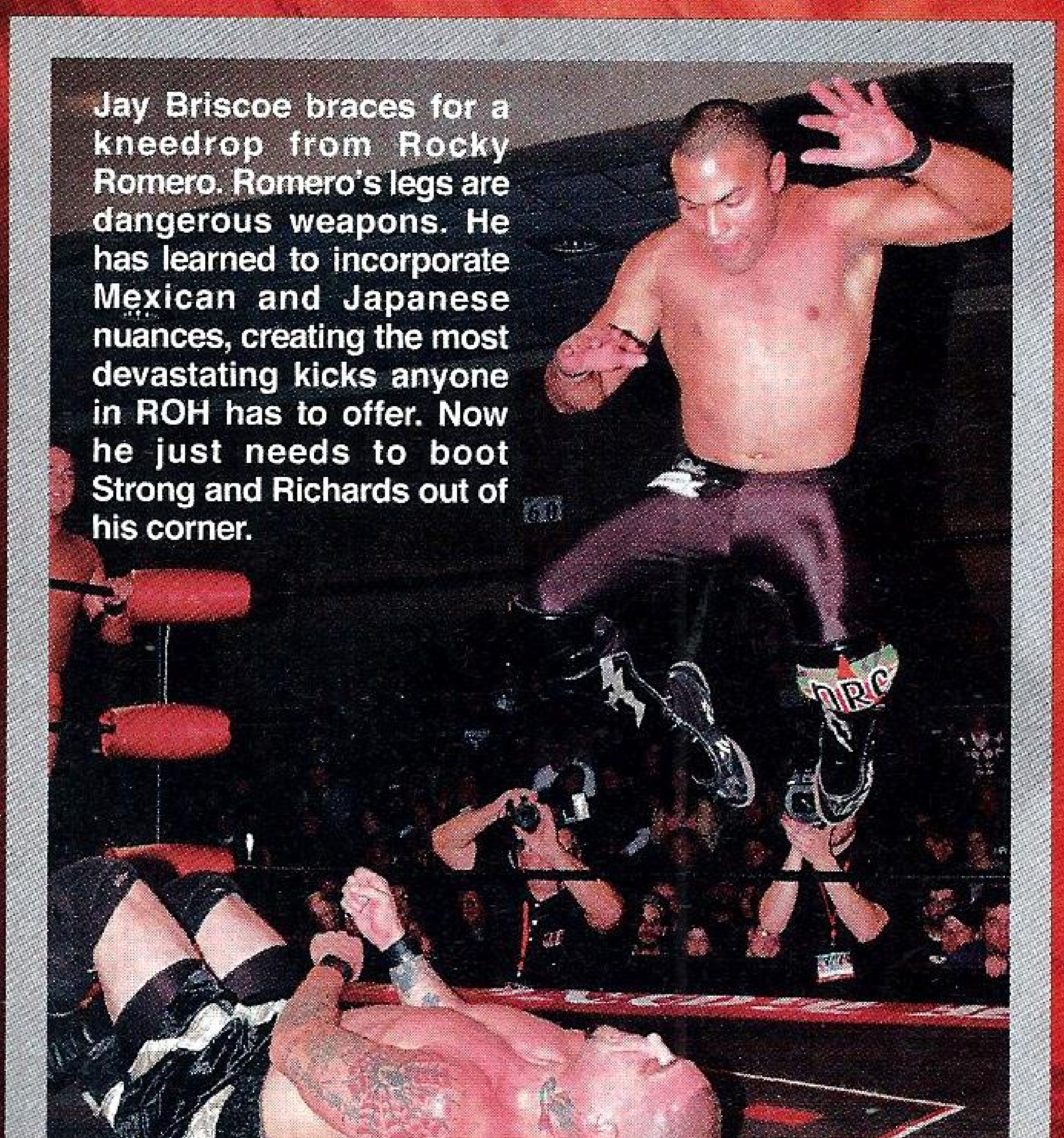
AMBITION: To capture the ROH tag team championship with fellow NRC members Davey Richards or Roderick Strong

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "There's one thing driving everybody to hate The No Remorse Corps—jealousy, plain and simple. And why shouldn't they be jealous? Never has wrestling seen such a dominant force as the NRC. And with my sweet skills on their side, we'll be on top for as long as we want. Azucar!"

ANALYSIS: Flanked by the outsized personalities of his partners Davey Richards and Roderick Strong, it's sometimes easy for Romero to get lost in the ROH shuffle. But, judging from his resume alone, the man who says he's as sweet as "azucar" need not take a backseat to any man.

"Rocky isn't just a good wrestler. He's a world-class warrior," said Strong. "He's accomplished more at the age of 26 than most wrestlers do in a lifetime."

Indeed, those in the know have long been aware of Romero's considerable talent. In fact, in 2007's "*PWI* 500," Romero broke the top 40—ranking higher than Ric Flair, Chavo Guerrero Jr., and Kane. He's an 11-year veteran who has competed extensively around the world, including in Japan and Mexico.



Jay Briscoe braces for a kneedrop from Rocky Romero. Romero's legs are dangerous weapons. He has learned to incorporate Mexican and Japanese nuances, creating the most devastating kicks anyone in ROH has to offer. Now he just needs to boot Strong and Richards out of his corner.

Photo by Joe Zanolle

Romero's international seasoning has contributed to an eclectic arsenal highlighted by an array of lethal kicks and countless armlock variations.

Romero has combined his training in American and Japanese wrestling, lucha libre, mixed martial arts, and even boxing to create a total package that has brought his opponents a lot of pain, and Romero a fair amount of gold.

The Cuban-American superstar began his career in 1997, having been trained by such ring legends as Antonio Inoki and Negro Casas. He cut his teeth in premiere national promotions, including Mexico's CMLL and New Japan Pro Wrestling, where he donned a mask as Black Tiger IV.

But most American wrestling fans know Romero through his work in Ring of Honor, where he has competed for four years. As one half of The Havana Pitbulls with Ricky Reyes, Romero wore the ROH tag team championship for more than six months over 2004 and 2005.

But the fiery fan favorite began to show a more arrogant side in 2007, after he was recruited by Strong and Richards in the NRC, which was formed to take on Austin Aries' faction, The Resilience.

Though he now draws jeers with his Salsa dance moves, Romero remained as effective as ever after joining the NRC, and in January of this year won a four-team "Ultimate Endurance" match to recapture the ROH tag team championship.

Romero and Richards had an impressive reign—defeating teams such as The Vulture Squad—before finally losing the belts three months later to Jay and Mark Briscoe.

But as good as he is, Romero may be building his own glass ceiling in ROH by aligning himself with Strong and Richards—two like-minded scoundrels who, no doubt, recruited Romero because of his tremendous upside. But as long as he's looking out for the interests of The No Remorse Corps, Romero cannot focus completely on his own career.

With a skill set as sizeable as his ego, "Azucar" has the ability to make it to the very top of ROH. "Rocky doesn't need those two other clowns," said former Resilience member Matt Cross. "Trust me—I've been on the receiving end of those kicks. He doesn't need to be one-third of nothing. But as long as he's running with Strong and Richards, he's going to have enemies."

ROCKY ROMERO

Photo by Joe Zanolle

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Exciting, angst-ridden member of ROH's stable of social misfits The Age of the Fall

AMBITION: To expand The Age of the Fall to include other wayward wrestlers in the ROH locker room; to recapture the ROH tag team championship with Jimmy Jacobs

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "Do you really think I care what some magazine has to say about me? You guys are just looking for another way to exploit the gullibility of the consumer. The Age of the Fall will have nothing to do with your capitalist propaganda. I'm hanging up now."

ANALYSIS: It seemed like an unusual combination to headline a Ring of Honor pay-per-view. In one corner was the established ROH main-eventer and dominant champion, Nigel McGuinness. In the other was a relative ROH newcomer known mostly as a tag team competitor—Tyler Black.

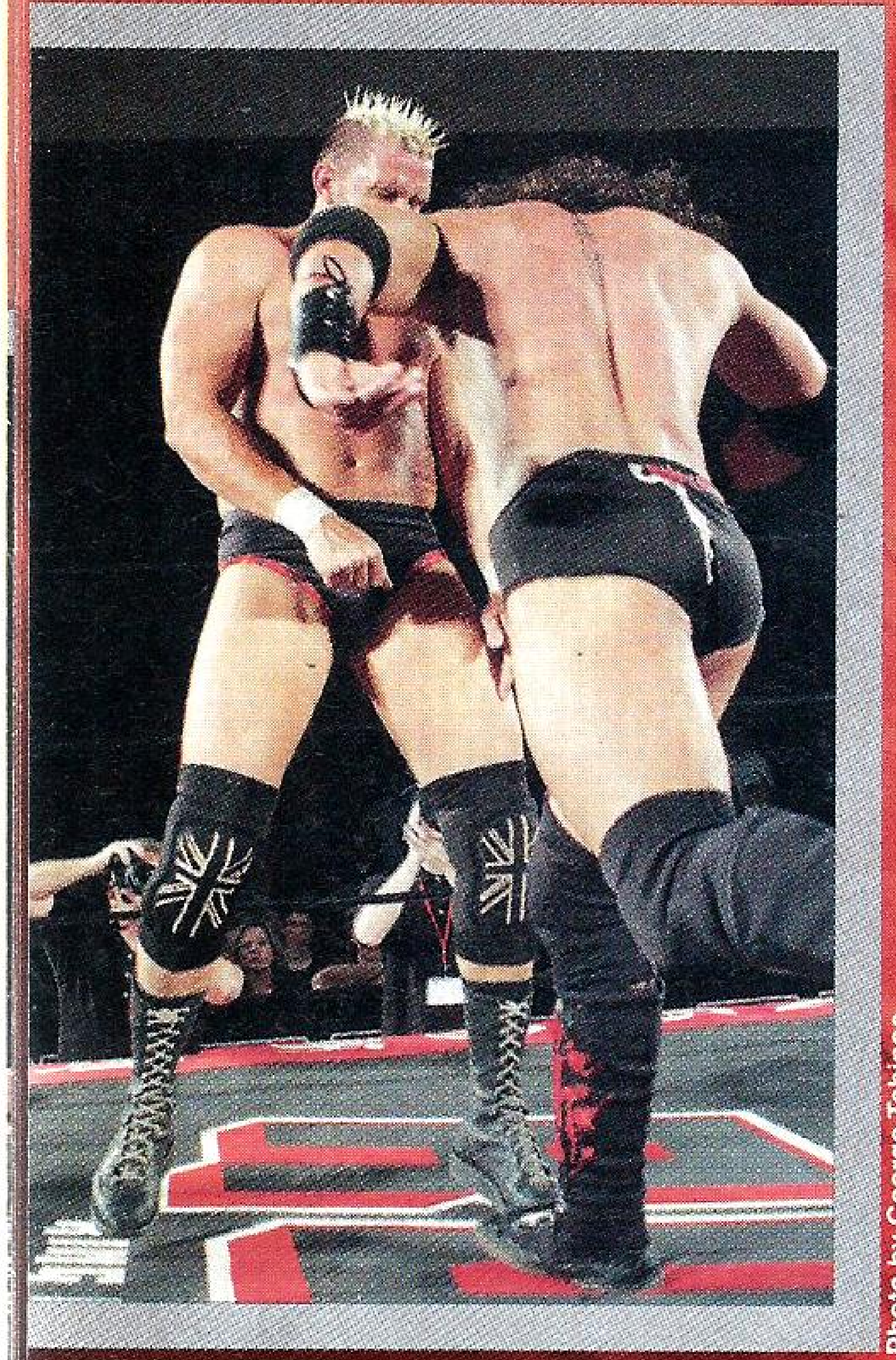


Photo by George Tahinos

ROH newcomer Tyler Black took on ROH veteran and champion Nigel McGuinness after winning a "Four-Corner Survival" match to earn a title shot. While Black didn't win the belt that night, he won the respect of ROH fans with his main-event performance.

But by the end of the night, Black proved to most fans in the building that he was right at home in singles competition.

"I'll give Tyler his due. He may be an antisocial moron, but that bloody kid gave me a hell of a fight," McGuinness told INSIDE WRESTLING recently. "I've got no use for that Age of the Fall bollocks, but that bloke may have quite the future ahead of him."

Indeed, at just 21 years old, Black has quickly broken through as one of ROH's most exciting, and fastest-rising stars. Black's agility and gutsiness may have only recently caught the eye of ROH fans and matchmakers, but those who have followed the Iowa native have seen his promise ever since he debuted in 2005.

Although still very early in his career, Black has already built a long resume, having competed in various independent promotions including IWA: Mid-South, NWA: Midwest, and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, as well as in Canada and Europe. He even competed in a 2006 edition of TNA *Impact*, and was part of the short-lived MTV project Wrestling Society X.

But it was in 2007 that Black made his first major splash on the national wrestling scene. It happened moments after ROH tag team champions, the Briscoes, retained their title in a grueling ladder war against Kevin Steen and El Generico in the main event of ROH's "Man Up" pay-per-view. After weeks of cryptic, ominous messages clogging up ROH message boards, The Age of the Fall made its debut, cruelly punishing the champions and stringing up Jay Briscoe by his legs.

Joining Jimmy Jacobs, Necro Butcher, and Lacey in the stable of social non-conformists was the brooding Black. The AOTF quickly made an impact in ROH as Black and Jacobs defeated the Briscoes for the tag team championship at Final Battle 2007. As the newcomer of the duo, Black instantly impressed observers with an offense that included a Pele kick, a running shooting star press, and his "God's Last Gift" cradle-DDT finisher.

The AOTF's reign was a short one, as the team dropped the belts a month later to Rocky Romero and Davey Richards. But Black's career highlight would come in a solo effort several weeks later.

At the March 16 taping of ROH's sixth pay-per-view, "Take No Prisoners," Black garnered an upset victory in a "Four-Corner Survival" match also involving Go Shiozaki, Claudio Castagnoli, and Delirious to win a shot later that night at McGuinness' ROH championship.

Black went into the match as a major underdog, but minutes into the affair the unlikely fan favorite had won over the hearts of the ROH faithful, who passionately rooted him on as he took the champion to the limit. In the end, McGuinness retained the title, but Black had earned something nearly as important as the ROH title—main-event clout and the ROH fans' respect.

TYLER BLACK

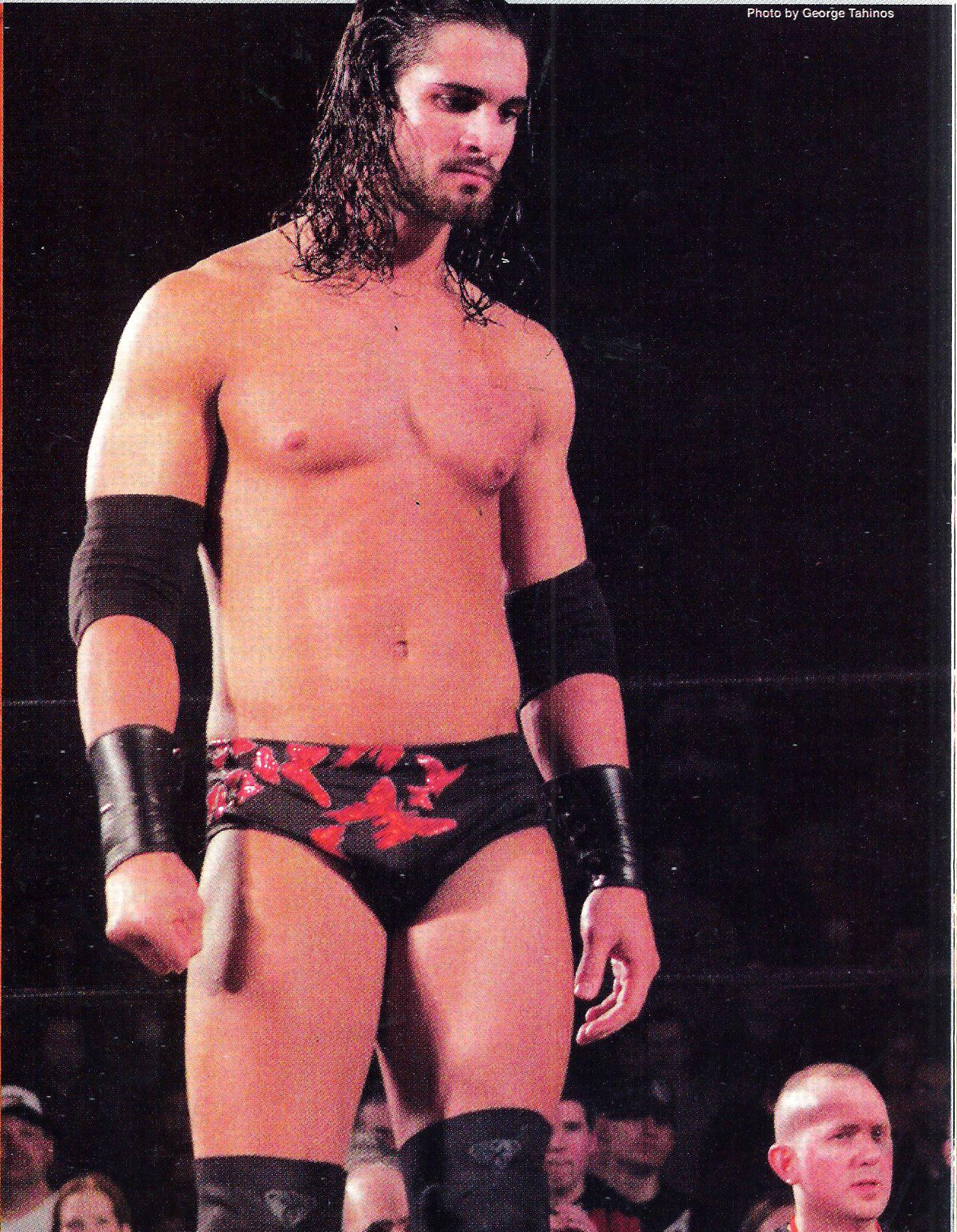


Photo by George Tahinos

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Seasoned ROH heavyweight and powerful henchman for Larry Sweeney's Sweet & Sour Inc.

AMBITION: To use his super-agent Larry Sweeney to help him focus his killer instinct and climb the ranks of ROH's singles division

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "I'm sick and tired of watching all these chumps get title shots while I waste my time throwing a bunch of wimps around the ring. It's time the 'Gun For Hire' gets his due, and with Sweet Sour Inc. having my back, it won't be long."

ANALYSIS: When he debuted in Ring of Honor in 2006, it was inevitable that Brent Albright would have to deal with the frequent heckles of "Gunner Scott"—his former name during his brief stint in WWE. But before long, the chants stopped, as one thing became apparent: It was in ROH that Albright would find his identity.

Today, the name Gunner Scott is a faint memory among ROH fans and wrestlers, who have borne witness to Albright's reign of destruction over the past two years.

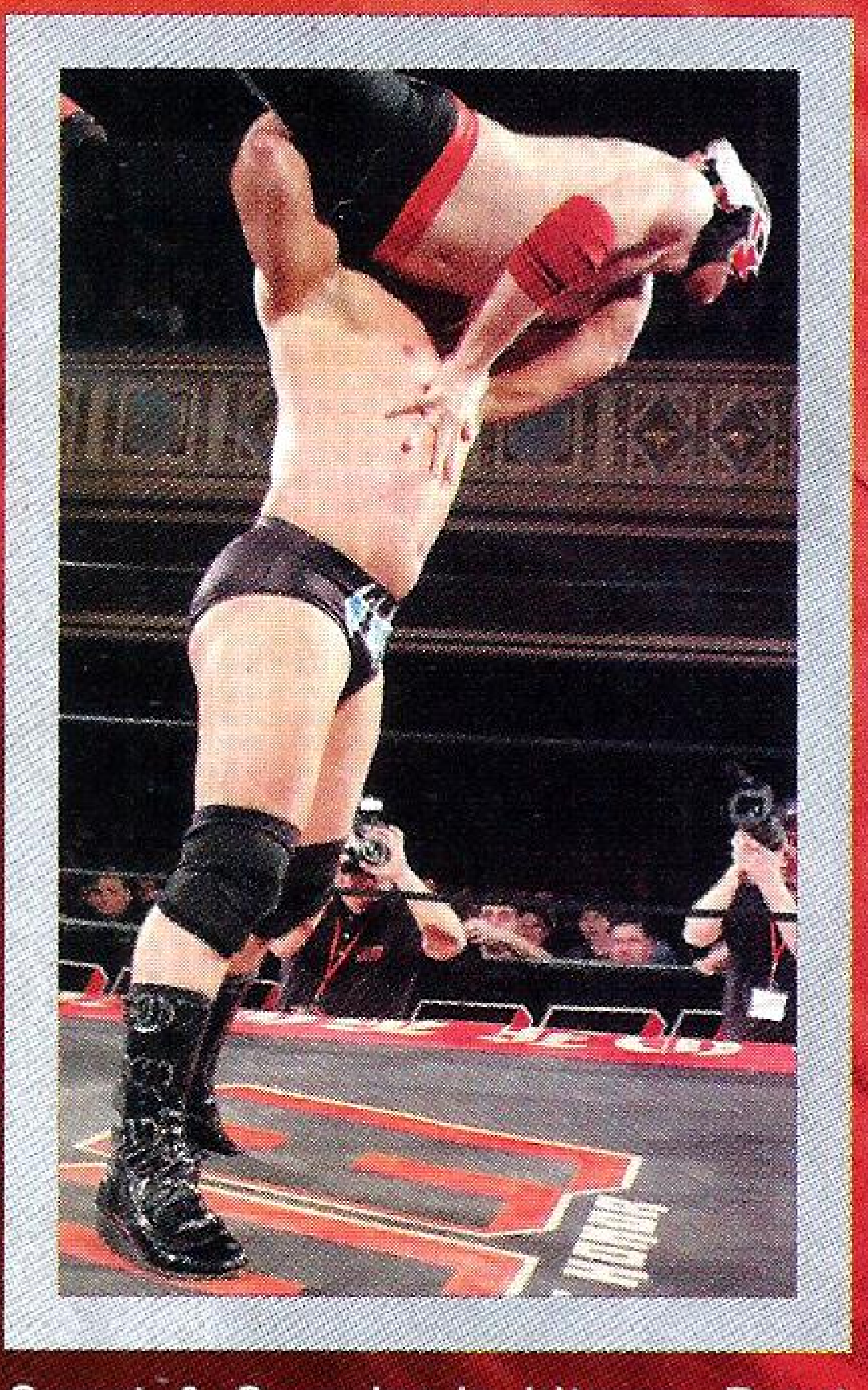


Photo by George Tahinos

Sweet & Sour Inc.'s hitman, Brent Albright, is the faction's go-to eliminator. But doing the bidding of others has gotten Albright few title matches, as "The Shooter" is often pitted against the likes of El Generico (pictured) instead of championship competition. Albright needs to start looking out for himself.

"Albright? I'll tell you all you need to know about him in just one word, son: badass," said a laughing Adam Pearce when asked about his hired henchman. "That son of a gun knows what this business is all about—winning and making money. And he's been doing a hell of a job at both of those."

Indeed, Albright's unabashed brutality has earned him the moniker "Gun For Hire" in ROH. Albright shows little pity for his opponents—tossing them around the ring with suplex variations that take advantage of his snapping quickness and phenomenal strength.

And while Albright's brightest days in ROH are still likely ahead of him, the Tulsa, Oklahoma, native is far from a rookie. After excelling in amateur wrestling throughout high school, Albright competed professionally in his home state before receiving additional training from Mike Modest at California's All Pro Wrestling Boot Camp.

In 2004, Albright scored a developmental deal with WWE and went on to become one of the most successful competitors in the history of then-WWE territory Ohio Valley Wrestling.

During his two-years in OVW, Albright became the only wrestler to capture every championship in the promotion, including the OVW heavyweight title. Then, in 2006, Albright was called up to WWE's Smackdown roster, where he was renamed Gunner Scott and saw some early success in matches against Booker T. So impressed was fellow Smackdown wrestler Chris Benoit, that he took Albright under his wing and competed in several tag team matches by his side.

But, ultimately, Albright's no-nonsense attitude proved to be a bad fit in WWE. Less than three months after his debut, he was sent back to OVW. A few months after that, he was released altogether.

It was obvious—painfully so to his opponents—that Albright had something to prove when he debuted as a regular part of the ROH roster weeks later. "The Shooter," as he is sometimes known, took apart his opponents and eventually drew the interest of several ROH ne'er-do-wells who looked to hire Albright to do their dirty work.

Ultimately, Albright found himself under the employ of Pearce as a member of Hangman 3 and took part in the decimation of several ROH fan favorites. But, most recently, Albright has aligned himself with Sweet & Sour Inc.

While Albright may be as intimidating as ever, his tactics have so far not translated into a tremendous amount of success in ROH. Albright came up short in a pair of ROH title matches last year, and tag title glory has been equally elusive.

The answer for Albright may be apparent: Stop doing the bidding of those that hire you, and start looking out for your own best interest. A hired gun with no bullets isn't worth much.

BRENT ALBRIGHT

Photo by Joe Zanolle

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

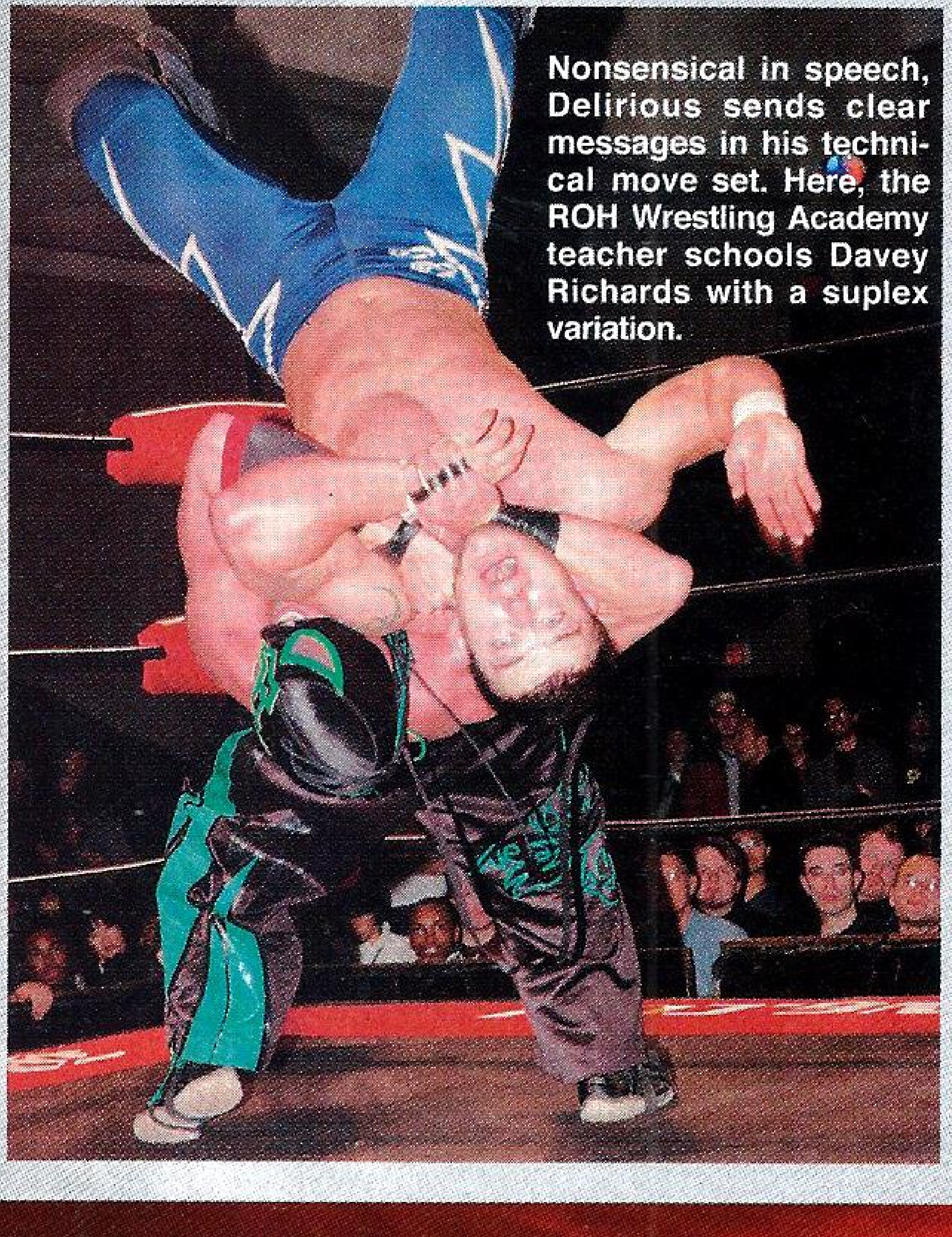
CURRENT ROLE: Bizarre fan favorite who lightens ROH's traditional style with his outrageous antics

AMBITION: To keep wreaking his unusual brand of havoc in ROH, and to occasionally disarm opponents with his new-found dark side

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: "Bah-bah! Delirious ... *(incomprehensible)* ... accept all challenge! ... *(incomprehensible)* ... blow your mind! ... *(incomprehensible)* ... Bah! Bah!"

ANALYSIS: Long before WWE fans were first startled to see Festus' wild reaction to the opening bell, another wrestling madman similarly interpreted the familiar "ding ding" as an order to unleash hell.

For four years, Delirious has torn through Ring of Honor with the same vivacity as the cartoon Tasmanian Devil. Along the way, the man hailing from the Edge of Sanity has made more of an impact for his quirkiness and comic timing than he has for his win/loss record. But make no mistake—beneath the flailing mask tassels lies a highly capable wrestler. Just ask his students.



Nonsensical in speech, Delirious sends clear messages in his technical move set. Here, the ROH Wrestling Academy teacher schools Davey Richards with a suplex variation.

Photo by Joe Zanolle

In a company where wrestling ability is valued above all else, ROH officials last year appointed Delirious as the head trainer of the Ring of Honor Wrestling Academy, and so far have been pleased with the results.

Indeed, there is a man behind the green and black mask, one who grew up in the St. Louis area and began his wrestling career in 2001. By 2003, Delirious had become a fixture in IWA: Mid-South, where he competed for several years and took part in heated feuds with other future ROH stars, including Jimmy Jacobs and Matt Sydal.

Delirious' crazy antics immediately won over fans in Ring of Honor, where he debuted in 2004 and injected a heaping dose of comedy into ROH's otherwise serious fare.

Capping off Delirious' bizarre ring style—which features a lot of directionless running, leaping, and fluttering—is his even more nonsensical interview style. Suffice to say, Delirious is fluent in gibberish.

By 2006, Delirious had risen to become a serious contender, nearly capturing the ROH Pure championship and winning that year's annual "Survival Of The Fittest" competition. He received several shots at the ROH title during Bryan Danielson's reign—and once even made the "American Dragon" tap out. But, try as he might, the masked man was never able to capture the belt.

Most recently, Delirious has been embroiled in an exhaustive rivalry with Adam Pearce that climaxed when Pearce's former stable, Hangman 3, went as far as to staple Delirious' signature mask to his face. In December, a hardened Delirious debuted a new red and black mask, and began spewing red poison at his opponents.

"We're definitely starting to see the darker side of Delirious, and if you ask me, it couldn't come soon enough," said his former rival Bryan Danielson. "The fans may get a kick out of his antics, but he needs to be more than that if he's going to make it to the top here. And he can. Trust me."

With his unorthodox wrestling style—highlighted by his cobra stretch submission hold and his Chemical Imbalance II wheelbarrow driver—Delirious has proven to be a very dangerous opponent. If he can settle down and stay focused, a future title run for Delirious makes a lot of sense.

His interviews, on the other hand ...

DELIRIOUS

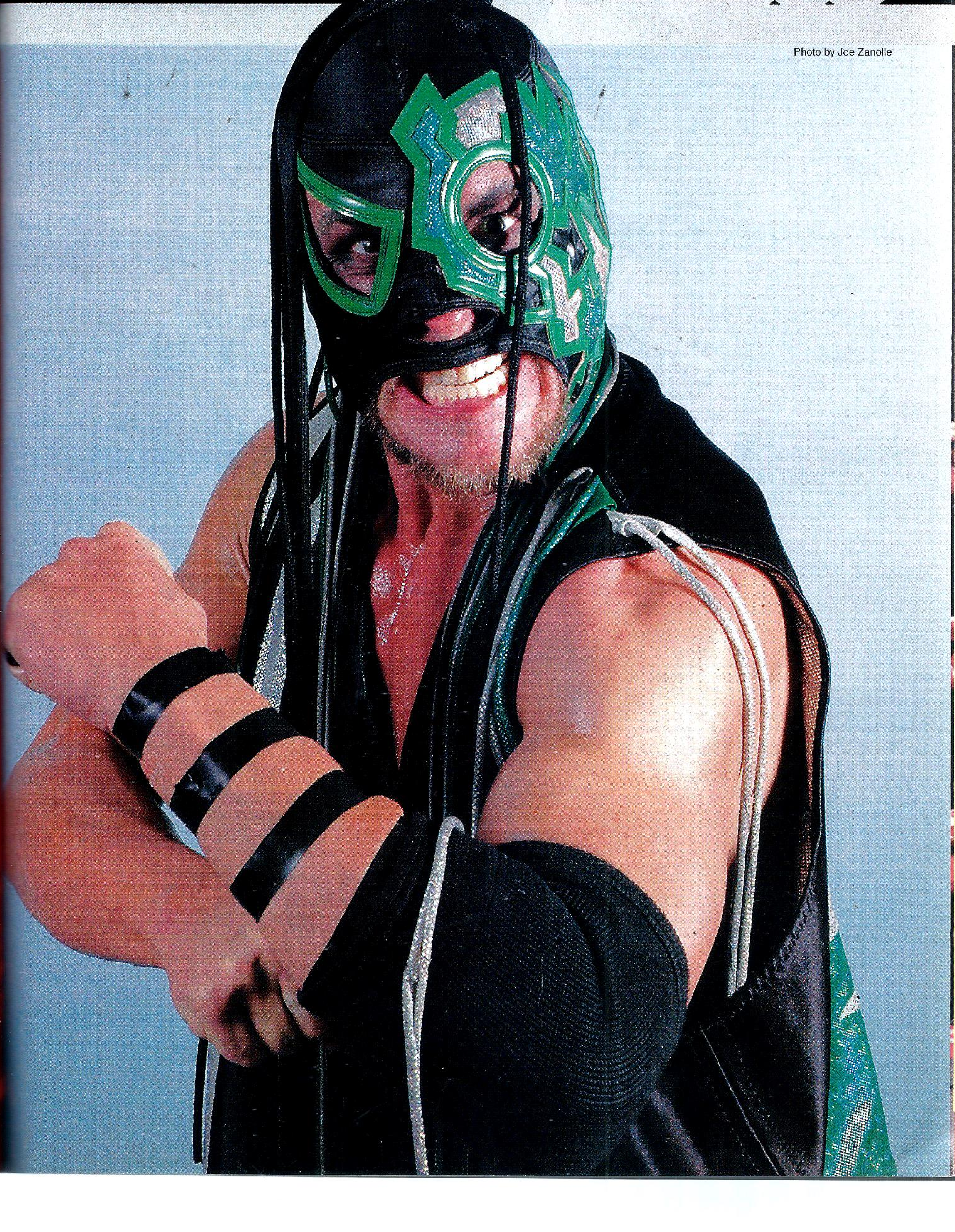


Photo by Joe Zanolle

ROH: 10 STARS YOU NEED TO KNOW

RING OF HONOR

CURRENT ROLE: Tough and intense Japanese import making a name for himself as an ROH fan favorite and rising star

AMBITION: To rack up an impressive winning streak during his current tour with ROH, while still remaining a top contender in his native Pro Wrestling NOAH

WHAT HE HAS TO SAY: (Through an interpreter) "It is a privilege to be able to compete here in Ring of Honor, where the wrestlers show the same heart, determination, and respect for the sport that I have always shown throughout my career. ROH's fans here in America have made me feel at home, and I look forward to sticking around for a while."

ANALYSIS: With his plain black trunks and white boots, Go Shiozaki may not look like the kind of wrestler who would be terribly exciting in the ring. But then, Steve Austin used to hear the same criticism.

Despite his plain appearance, the Pro Wrestling NOAH fixture has quickly built a reputation as one of the toughest and most intense wrestlers on the ROH roster, and a possible centerpiece of the promotion in coming years.

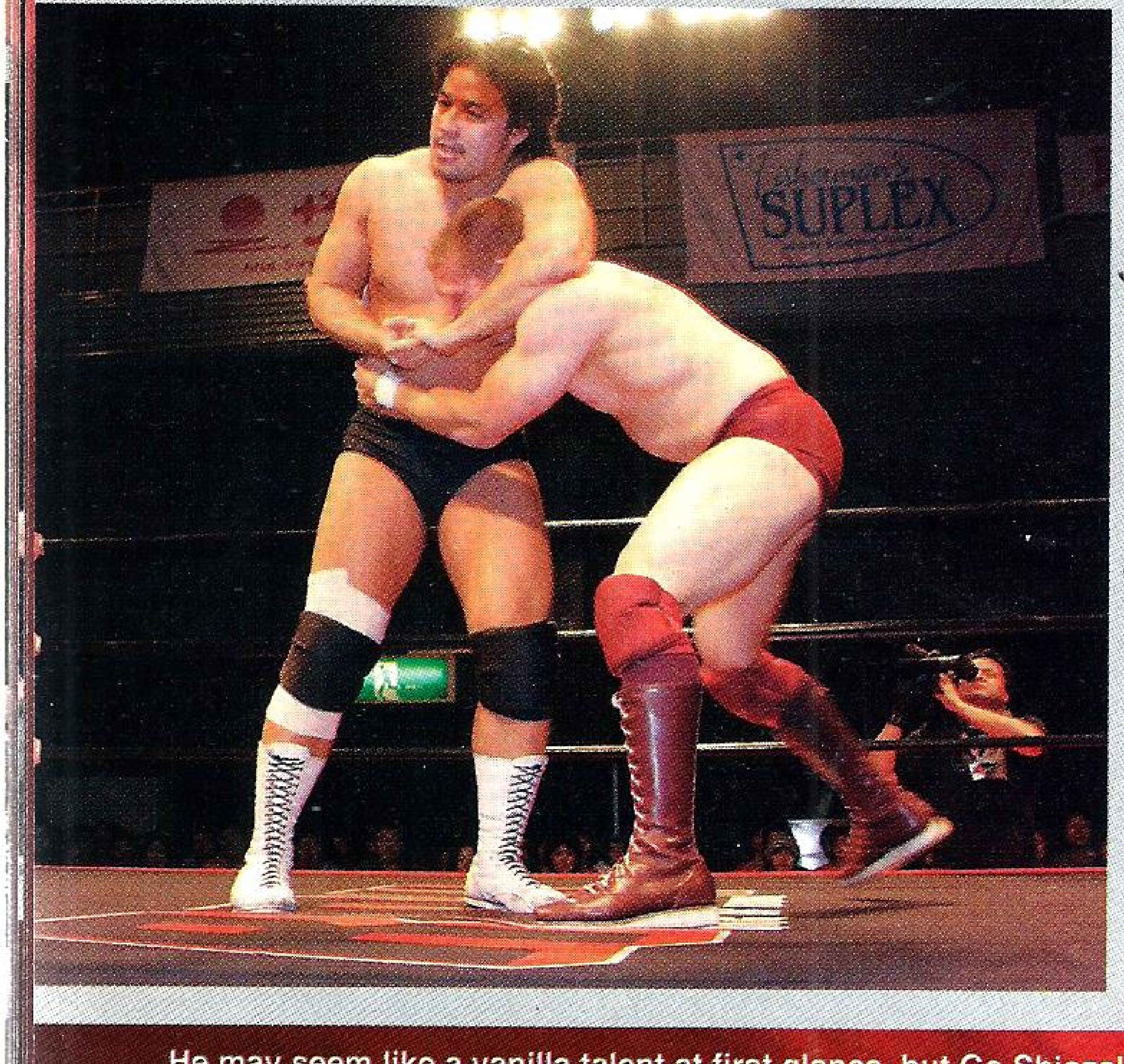


Photo by George Tahinos

He may seem like a vanilla talent at first glance, but Go Shiozaki has proven to American audiences that he is anything but. Against ROH veterans like Bryan Danielson, Shiozaki has more than proven his worth.

"After you wrestle that man, you feel it for days," said former ROH champion Taskeshi Morishima. "He may look about half my size, but he can hit just as hard."

Shiozaki began competing in NOAH at the age of 21, and soon formed an impressive tag team with Japanese legend Kenta Kobashi. Together, the team picked up wins against Kensuke Sasaki and Katsuhiko Nakajima, and against Jun Akiyama and Doug Williams at 2005's "Universal Uproar" supershow in England.

After various ups and downs, Shiozaki cemented a place as one of Japan's hottest singles competitors in 2006—and in that year also got his first taste of ROH competition during the company's first tour through the United Kingdom. There, he picked up a win against B.J. Whitmer.

A year later, Shiozaki found himself face to face with one of ROH's most formidable stars, "American Dragon" Bryan Danielson, during an ROH Tokyo show. Danielson won the match, but Shiozaki instantly earned the respect of ROH fans and matchmakers for taking the former champion to the limit.

Shiozaki's next ROH match would be his most significant. In January, Shiozaki received a shot at Nigel McGuinness' ROH title during a NOAH card in Japan. Like he does to all his opponents, Shiozaki battered his foe with violently stiff lariats, kicks, and punishing suplexes. But at the end of the 30-plus-minute classic, McGuinness forced Shiozaki to submit to an armbar.

In the weeks that followed, Shiozaki would become a regular part of ROH's touring roster in the United States. He was met with a hero's welcome by American fans, who were instantly taken by Shiozaki's strong style approach and go flasher suplex/elbowdrop combo finisher.

Shiozaki has already picked up wins against such ROH competitors as Necro Butcher, El Generico, and Brent Albright, and has held his own in matches against Kevin Steen and Austin Aries. He was even part of the main event of ROH's big Dragon Gate Challenge card in Orlando over WrestleMania weekend.

Indeed, ROH fans have seen past the plain trunks and found in Shiozaki a wrestler they can get behind. In any language, their chants of "Go! Go! Go!" speak volumes.

GO SHIOZAKI

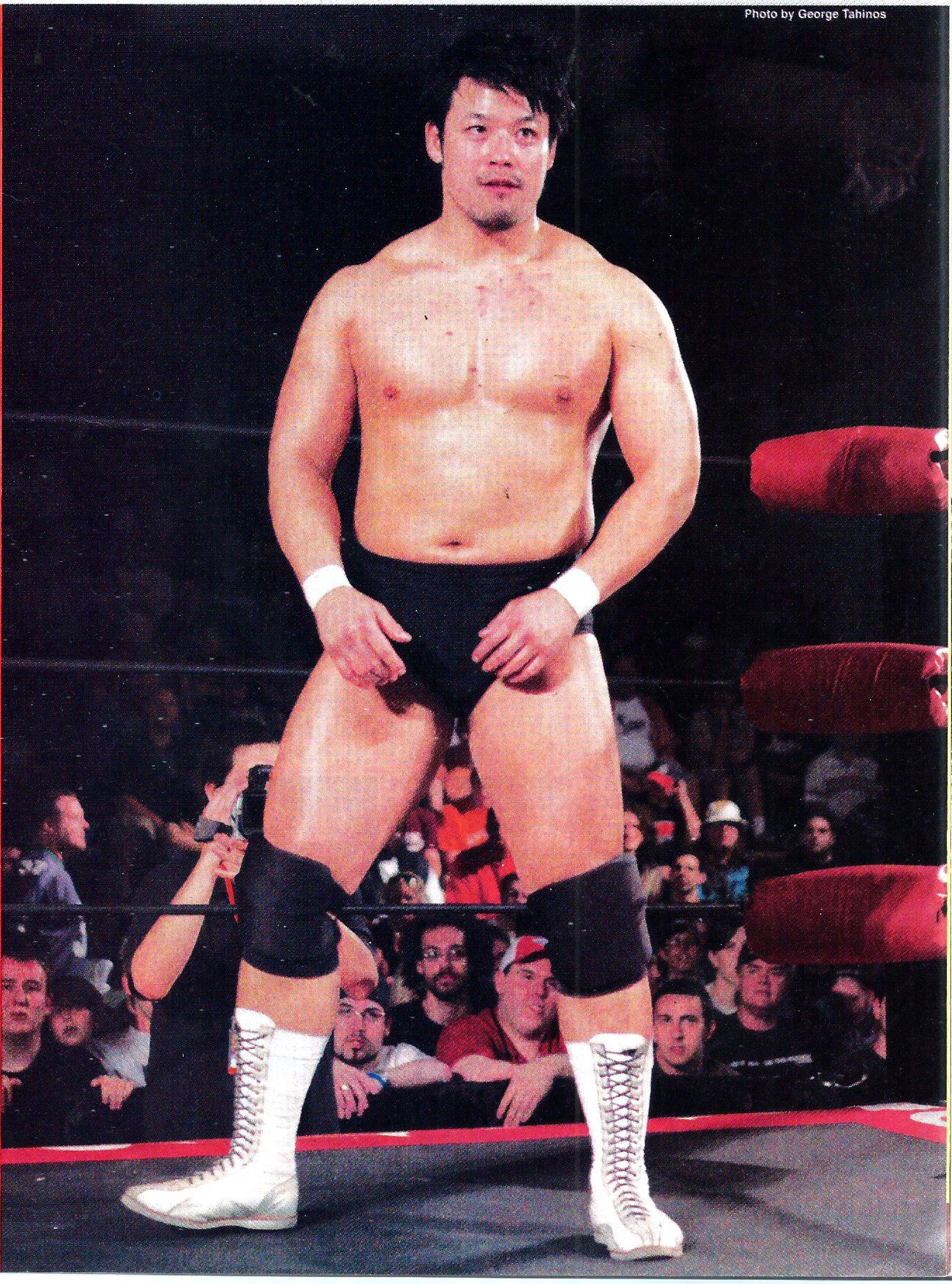
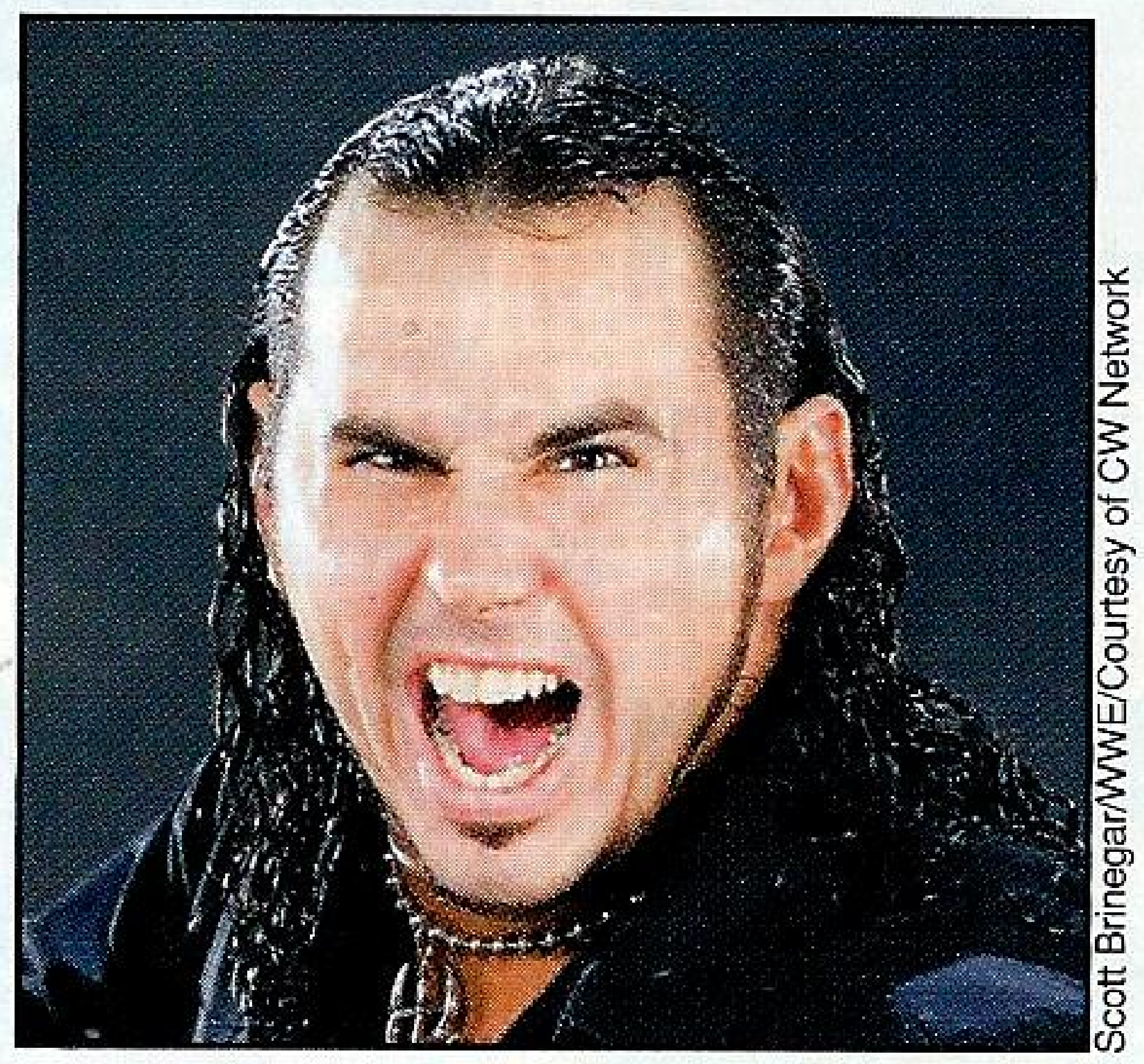


Photo by George Tahinos

Matt Hardy

"All I've ever demanded is a fair chance"



Scott Brinegar/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

> **"I'm never gonna back down from a challenge, so it's up to [MVP] to admit Matt Hardy is the better man, the better athlete, and the better wrestler."**

FEW CURRENT WWE wrestlers have been subject to more controversy—or enjoyed a more dedicated cult following—than the outspoken Matt Hardy. At 33 years of age, he has already been in the wrestling business for 15-plus years and his taken a career path that could be described as labyrinthine.

A devoted wrestling fanatic from youth, Hardy was trained by former NWA World champion Dory Funk Jr., and formed one of the sport's most innovative tag teams along with younger brother Jeff. More recently, he's concentrated on singles wrestling.

Hardy has been embroiled in a seemingly endless series of feuds during his career, most famously with former friend Edge. Over the course of the past year, Hardy locked horns with Montel Vontavious Porter in a storyline that has seen the wrestlers embroiled in a series of competitions inside and outside of the ring. After several injuries and health-related setbacks, Hardy took the U.S. championship from his arch-rival at WWE's Backlash pay-per-view.

Despite accumulating what Hardy himself describes as "a growing collection of scars," the wrestler still employs an aggressive, go-for-broke style. However, Hardy admits that he's had to learn the value of a little patience in order to pace himself for longer bouts.

One thing that has not changed about Hardy is his openness with his fans about his life—in and out of the ring. Hardy was one of the first wrestlers to record his uncensored thoughts on a personal website, something that has not always endeared him to management. He has taken pains to update the site regularly, despite his hectic travel.

Hardy recently granted an interview to Inside Wrestling *contributing writer Bill Meltzer. He spoke candidly about his rivalry with MVP, his brother Jeff, and the lessons he's learned over the course of his career.*

Q: Matt, ever since returning to the ring and adding the U.S. championship to your collection of title belts, you've had the upper hand in most of your battles with MVP. Is the feud winding down?

A: Here's the thing: Porter is still stuck on that whole kick to prove he's better than me at everything. I'm never gonna back down from a challenge, so it's up to him to admit Matt Hardy is the better man, the better athlete, and the better wrestler. I'm man enough to admit he's been one of my toughest opponents, and I don't get bored wrestling him. But I'm always looking for new challenges, too. So, to answer your question, MVP's gotta show me something new or it's time for him to move back in line.

Q: How are you feeling physically? It's been a rough year for you injury-wise and health-wise with the emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix.

A: I feel great. It wasn't so much the appendectomy that took a lot time to recover from; it was the recovery from the ruptured appendix. The surgery went fine. But the pain from the rupture was excruciating. After the surgery, it takes time to build up your strength and regain the weight you lost. Once they got the appendix out, I immediately felt better. It just takes a little time.

Q: Was that the hardest part—being out of action while recuperating?

A: Yeah, for sure. I'm not the kind of guy who likes to sit around too much. But I've gotten better. I'm much more patient than I used to be. That's a real hard thing to learn, patience. But if you are going to last in this business, you need it. Dory Funk Jr.

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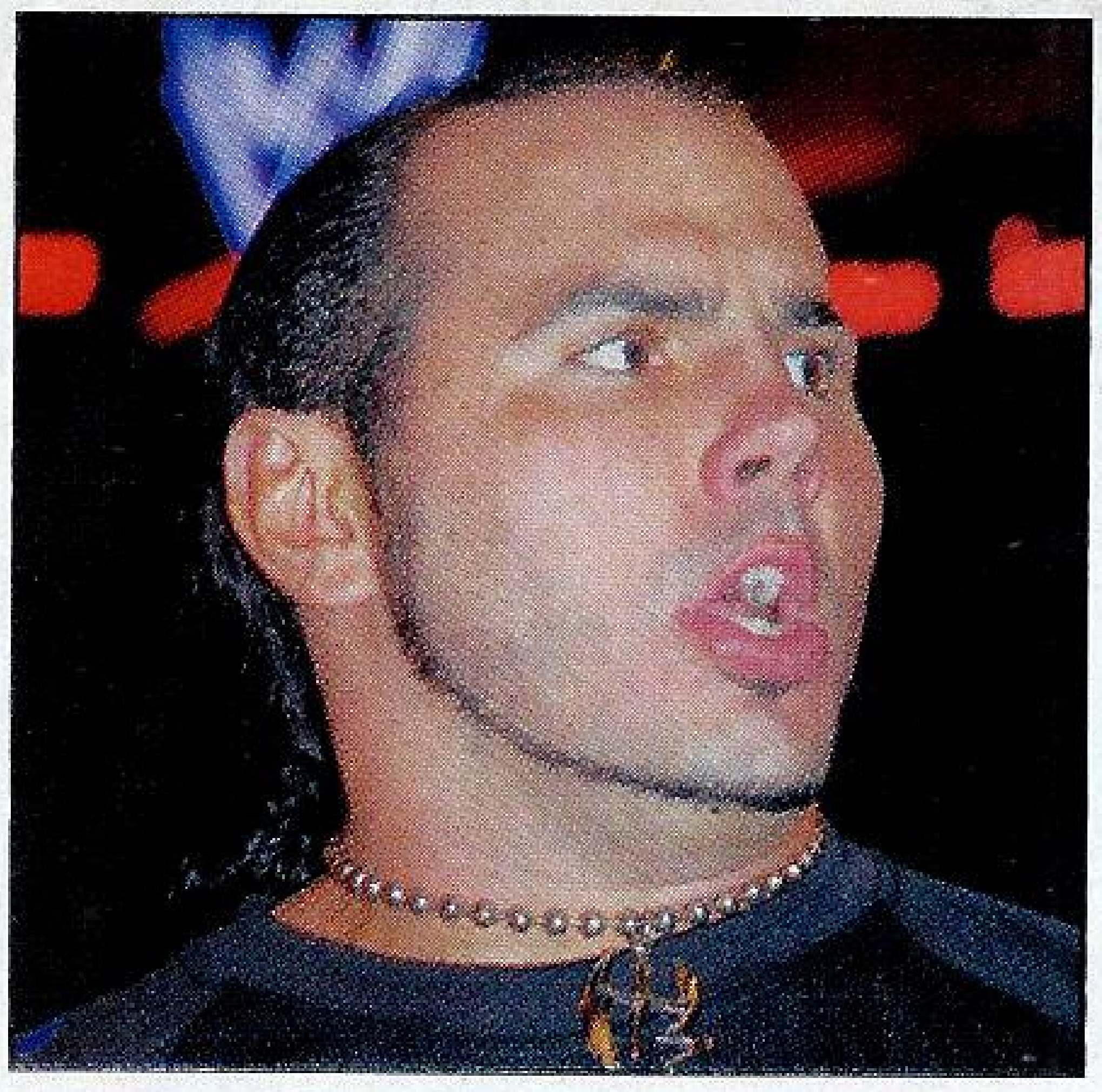
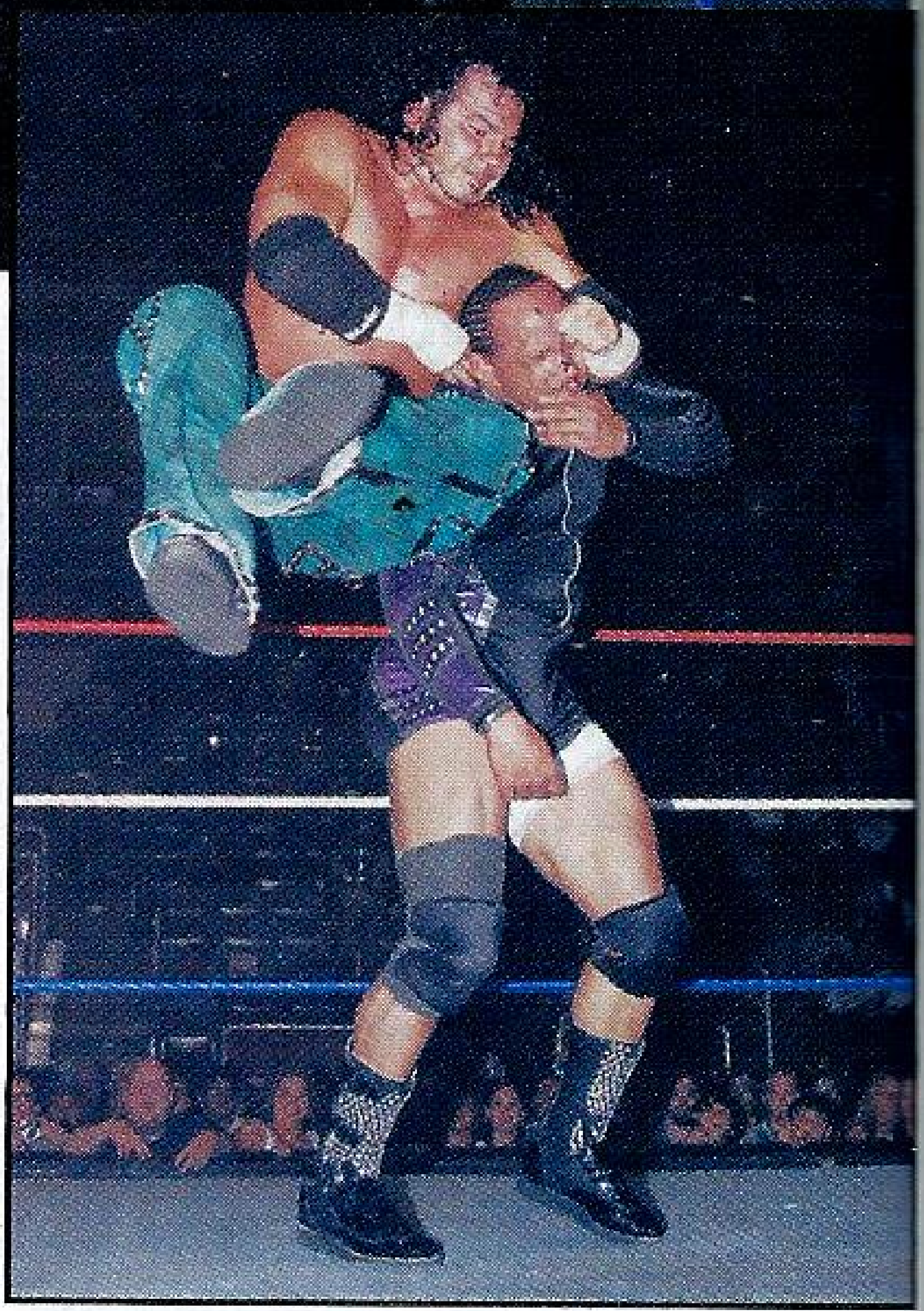




U.S. Champion Matt Hardy is convinced that Montel Vontavious Porter is obsessed with proving his superiority over him at all costs (above). In the ring, however, Hardy has proven himself to be the better wrestler (right).

> *"I'm my own toughest critic. I consider myself an underachiever, because I always think I can do a little bit better. I never forget that my fans pay their money to watch me, because I used to be one of those fans myself."*

told me that way back at the beginning. Now I see why he's been around so long.

Q: Can you elaborate? How did you learn to be more patient, and how has it helped you professionally?

A: It's just learning from experience. It took me a while to realize that there's more to wrestling than just the way you execute moves. It's not just about getting over with the fans. There's more to it than that. In my 20s, I used to get ticked off if things didn't click right away. But one thing I learned is that it's what you do on the nights when things aren't working so great that sets apart the best in the business from everyone else. One thing you can say about Ric Flair is that he could have a great match with anyone, because he knew how to pace himself, and he could adapt to whatever worked on that particular night. I've also got to admit that Edge is one of those guys, too.

Q: You hovered in the WWE midcard for a while after your bloody feud with Edge. Do you think you lost momentum after those matches?

A: I don't know. That series was so intense, especially at the beginning, that maybe there was a little bit of a letdown when it was over. But I never thought I was burned out after those matches, not at all.

Q: Despite the titles you've won, some critics have labeled you an underachiever in your WWE career. Is that an unfair assessment?

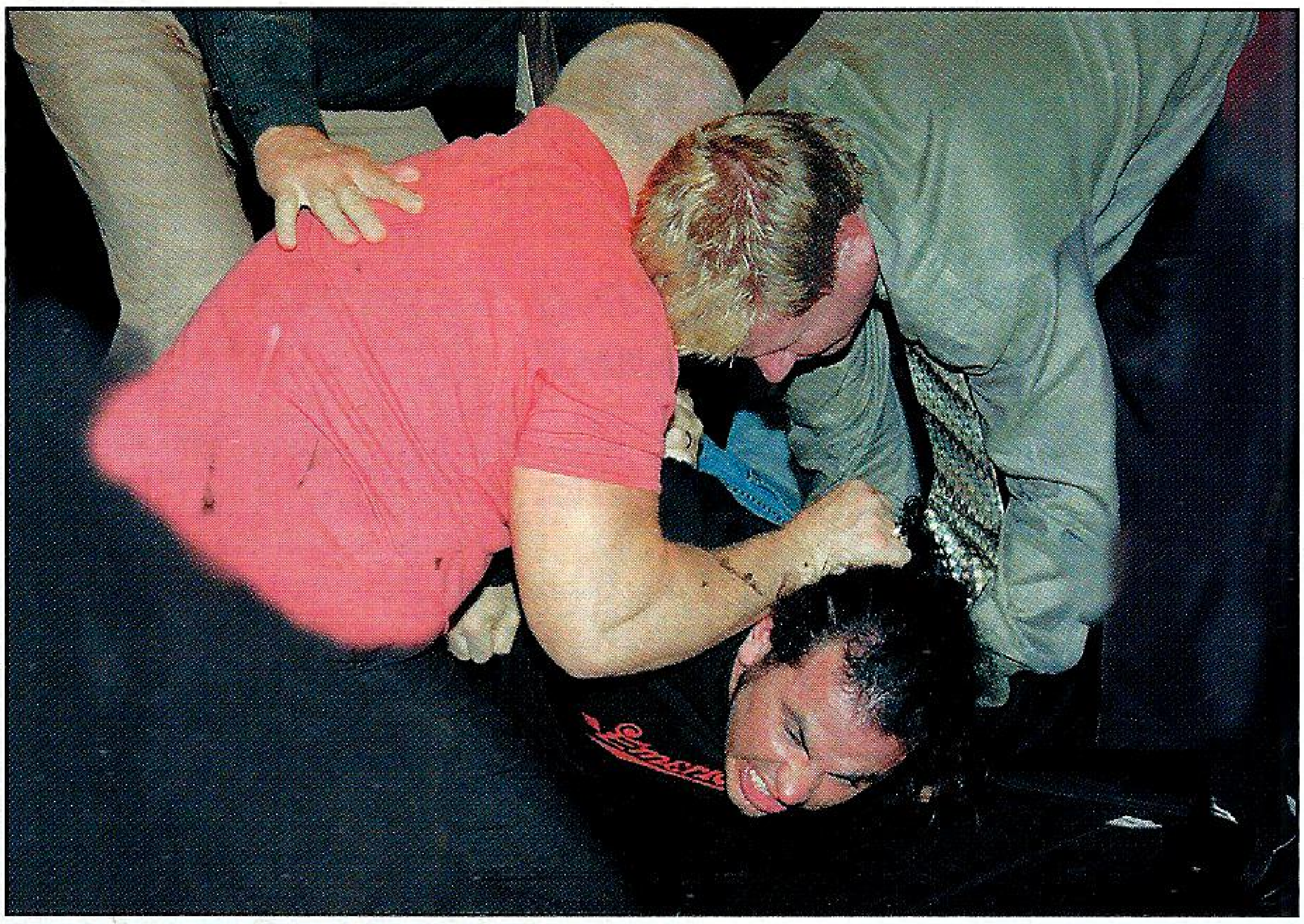
A: It's unfair in the sense that the people who say that often have no idea what really goes on in this business, inside and outside the ring. But I'm my own toughest critic. I consider myself an underachiever, because I always think I can do a little bit better. I never forget that my fans pay their money to watch me, because I used to be one of those fans myself. From Day One, my goal has been to be one of those guys who does things that make you say, "That's easy!" and then when you try to learn it, you realize how tough it really is. Like I said, there's more to it than just the technical part.

Q: You and your brother have always had a huge cult following among the fans. What would you point to as the single biggest factor in the loyal following you've achieved?

A: Tough question. I'd have to say it's my honesty, for better or for worse. You can't fool the fans, at least not the ones who will keep coming back. I owe everything to the fans. If I ever felt like I was going through the motions, I'd quit. It's not just about getting a push or winning matches, either. It's about making sure the fans get what they're paying for. I might be just a hardheaded redneck, but that's the way I see things [*laughs*].

Q: Define "Mattitude" for us.

A: Mattitude is standing up for what you believe in. Doing that in this business has cost me money; it's cost me in terms of some of the politics that go on. But if I see things I don't like, I'm not gonna keep quiet. That will never change. The other part of Mattitude is to never cheat the fans or the other wrestlers by giving less than your best. There are people in this business—and they know who they are—who think they can give 50 percent or 75 percent and people won't know the difference. Whatever differences I have



Never one to stay quiet, Hardy had to be restrained by WWE security after attacking Edge several times on Raw in 2005.

with MVP—or Edge, for that matter—I have total respect for what they bring to the ring.

Q: On your website, you wrote a harrowing blog about discovering the fire that destroyed Jeff's home. How has that experience changed you?

A: It makes you realize what's really important in life: family. When I saw the house burning and couldn't get through to Jeff and [his girlfriend] Beth, I didn't know right away if they were trapped inside or if they were okay. It's a feeling I wouldn't wish on anyone. Thank God they were safe. Look, a house can be rebuilt. It's the things that make it a home—things from your private and public life—that are so hard to replace. On my page on MySpace, I told fans how they can help. I've asked fans to donate their mementos, photos, etc. and the response has been amazing. Jeff is dealing with a lot of personal stuff right now in his life, but our fans' support means every bit as much to him as it does to me.

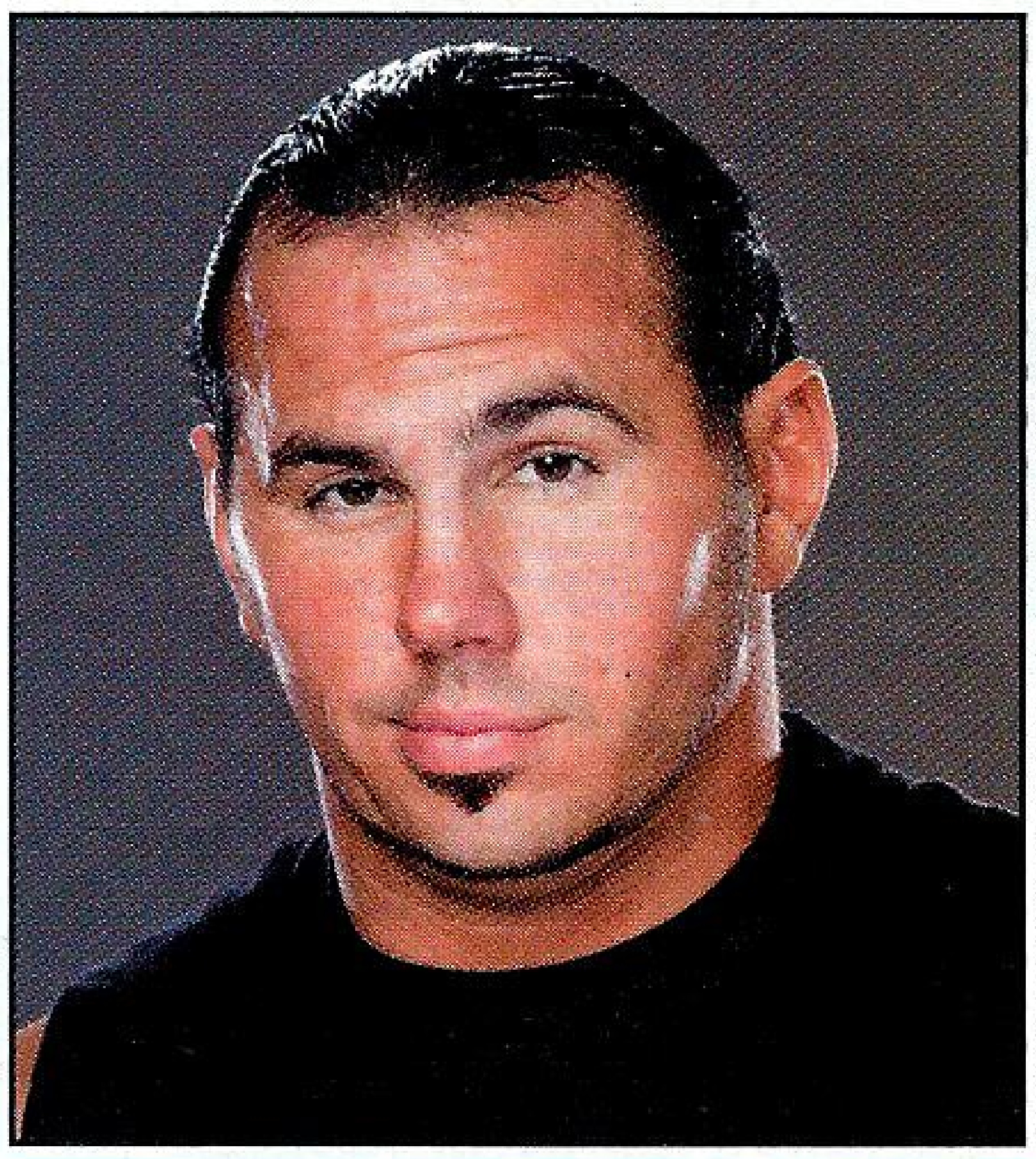
Matt parleyed his WrestleMania return into a World title match on Raw. Though he had then-champ Randy Orton down and out at one point, Orton and his RKO prevailed.

Q: The Hardy Boyz were one of the top tag teams of the recent era. Do you prefer singles wrestling or tag teams?

A: I've always wanted to be a guy who was known for doing both. There aren't too many guys who are good at both—it's a whole different approach to making a match click. It's always been special to team up with Jeff—it's something I'd never take for granted. But right now, I'm hitting a good groove in singles matches. The MVP matches have been some of my best in a while.

Q: What are your goals for the next couple of years?

A: You know, I've learned that you can't afford to think too far ahead. There are too many things that are beyond your control. My goal is to keep pushing myself in the ring and make my fans look forward to the next Matt Hardy match. Whether that's a defense of the U.S. title, a world title match, a tag team match, or whatever, it doesn't matter. All I've ever demanded is a fair chance, and if I get that, I know I'll succeed.



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> ***"Mattitude is standing up for what you believe in. Doing that in this business has cost me money; it's cost me in terms of some of the politics that go on. But if I see things I don't like, I'm not gonna keep quiet."***

Q: Some people might say that running in from the crowd and knocking MVP off the ladder in the "Money In The Bank" match at WrestleMania 24 wasn't very fair. How would you respond to those people?

A: I would just tell them that you can't sit around waiting for your fair chance—you gotta go out and make it happen. I knew that by attacking Porter at 'Mania, there was no way he wouldn't wrestle me. What I did at WrestleMania earned me a shot at the U.S. title, and I won it fair and square. It also got me a shot at the Raw World title. I didn't win that belt, but I'll earn myself another shot soon. Like I said, all I need is a fair chance. ☐

Is WWE Finally Getting Serious About Its Tag Team Division?

> **"If WWE is going to make a tag team division into a division worth anything, it has to give us teams that stick together a while and aren't made up of guys who WWE has made it clear can't accomplish anything of note in the singles division."**
> **—Bill Meltzer**

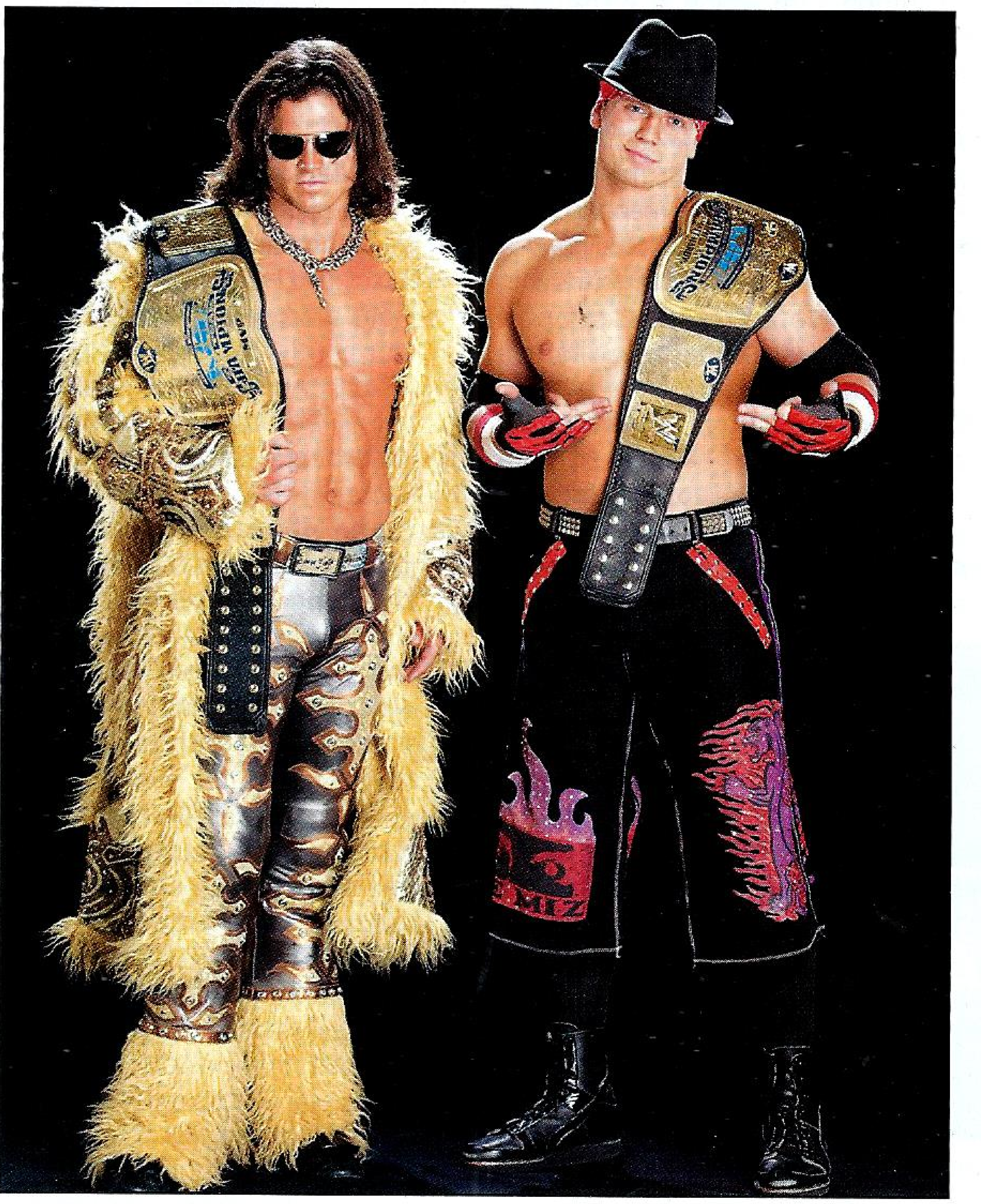
GIVE US YOUR Steiners, your Road Warriors, your Hart Foundation, your British Bulldogs.

Okay, all those WWE fans who love tag team wrestling (there are some out there who are keeping the faith) would settle for something on the level of the glory days of The Smokin' Gunns, Godwinns, or Headbangers.

As good a promoter as Vince McMahon has proven himself to be over the last quarter-century, he just doesn't get tag team wrestling. Or at least he hasn't for a long time. Then again, maybe he just doesn't want to.

McMahon seems to be of the mindset that it's singles wrestling that puts all those millions of dollars into his bank account. And he's right. But there should be a place—or at least a few quarter-hours—for great tag team wrestling in WWE, right? There have been some signs of late that WWE has a mild interest in promoting tag team wrestling again. Was there actually a match on Raw a while back in which Santino Marella and Carlito officially earned the right to call themselves the number-one contenders to the Raw tag title held by Hardcore Holly and Cody Rhodes? An actual buildup to a tag team title bout?

Smackdown tag champions John Morrison and The Miz, the returning Cryme Tyme, Brian Kendrick and Paul London, and Jimmy Wang Yang and Shannon Moore are among the other stronger regular duos on the WWE roster. The talent is there. The real issue is whether this is just another tease that will soon be forgotten by WWE Creative. Recent history suggests that the latter scenario is more likely to be true. A bigger issue, perhaps, is whether WWE should even bother pushing a tag team division. Publisher Stu Saks invited Managing Editor Frank Krewda, Senior Writer Dave Lenker, and Contributing Writer Bill Meltzer to convene a discussion about this very subject.



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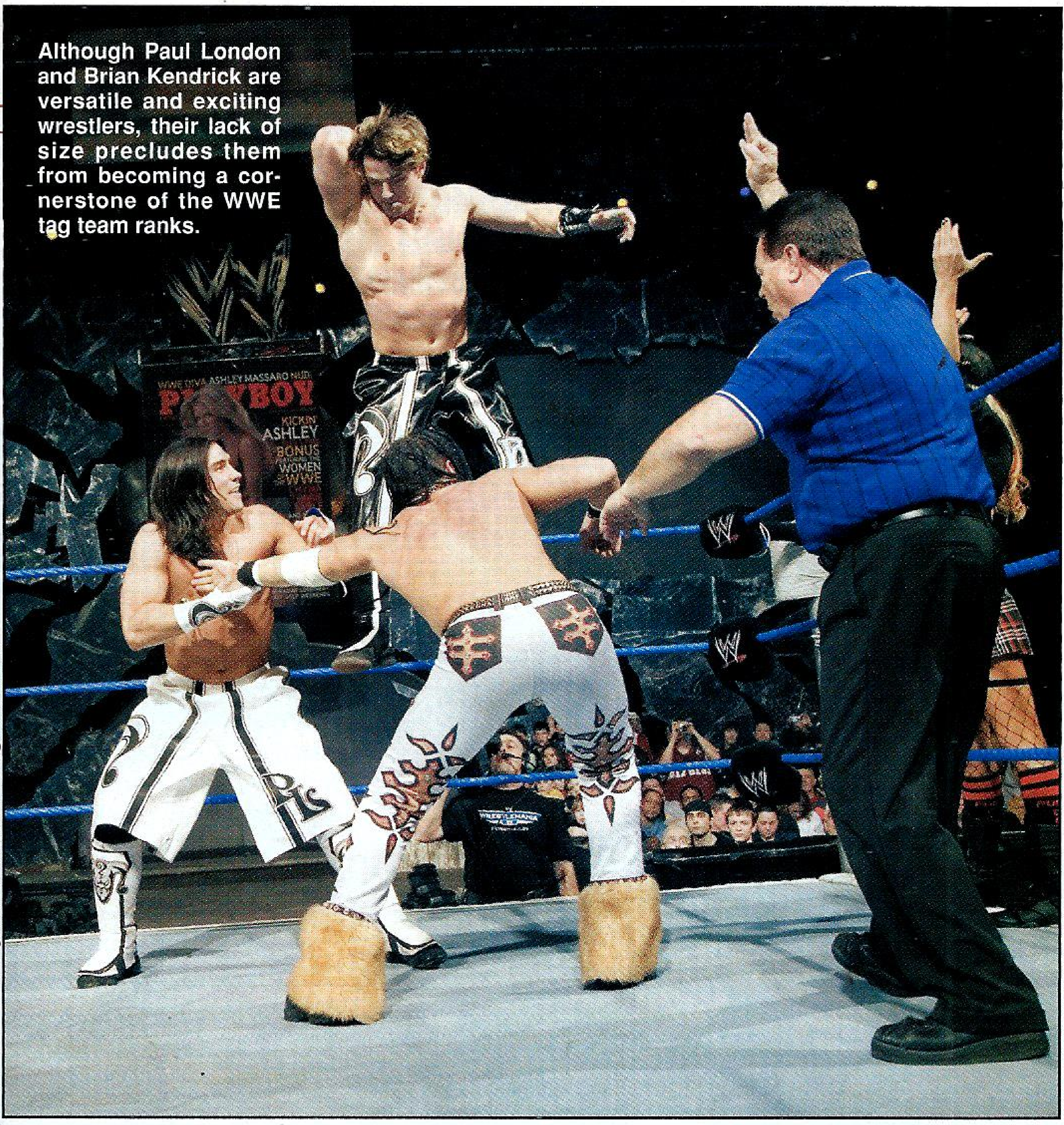
John Morrison and The Miz have been successful, hard-working Smackdown World tag team champs, but they are not considered to be a dominant tandem.

STU SAKS: Okay, we've all had a few days to think about this issue, so let's get to it. Should we be at all excited about the immediate future of tag team wrestling in WWE?



Although Paul London and Brian Kendrick are versatile and exciting wrestlers, their lack of size precludes them from becoming a cornerstone of the WWE tag team ranks.

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BILL MELTZER: The easy answer is no, Stu. Not unless TNA Creative takes over WWE Creative sometime soon.

SAKS: I don't see that happening.

MELTZER: Where the two tag team titles in WWE are concerned, it's the wrestlers that make the titles, not vice versa, Stu. Nobody takes Cody Rhodes and Hardcore Holly that seriously. Same goes for The Miz and John Morrison.

DAVE LENKER: I'm not quite *that* pessimistic, Stu, but I have my doubts. TNA certainly does have a very deep and very exciting tag team roster, and that tells me tag team wrestling can still appeal to fans in 2008. Fans have it in them to care about it. WWE could do some great things with tag teams, and it really wouldn't be that hard. Go back less than a decade and remember how much people loved that fantastic Hardy Boyz vs. Edge and Christian vs. The Dudley Boyz three-way rivalry. I'll give you even more recent examples with Charlie Haas and Shelton Benjamin and Eddie and Chavo Guerrero. Even Kendrick and London.

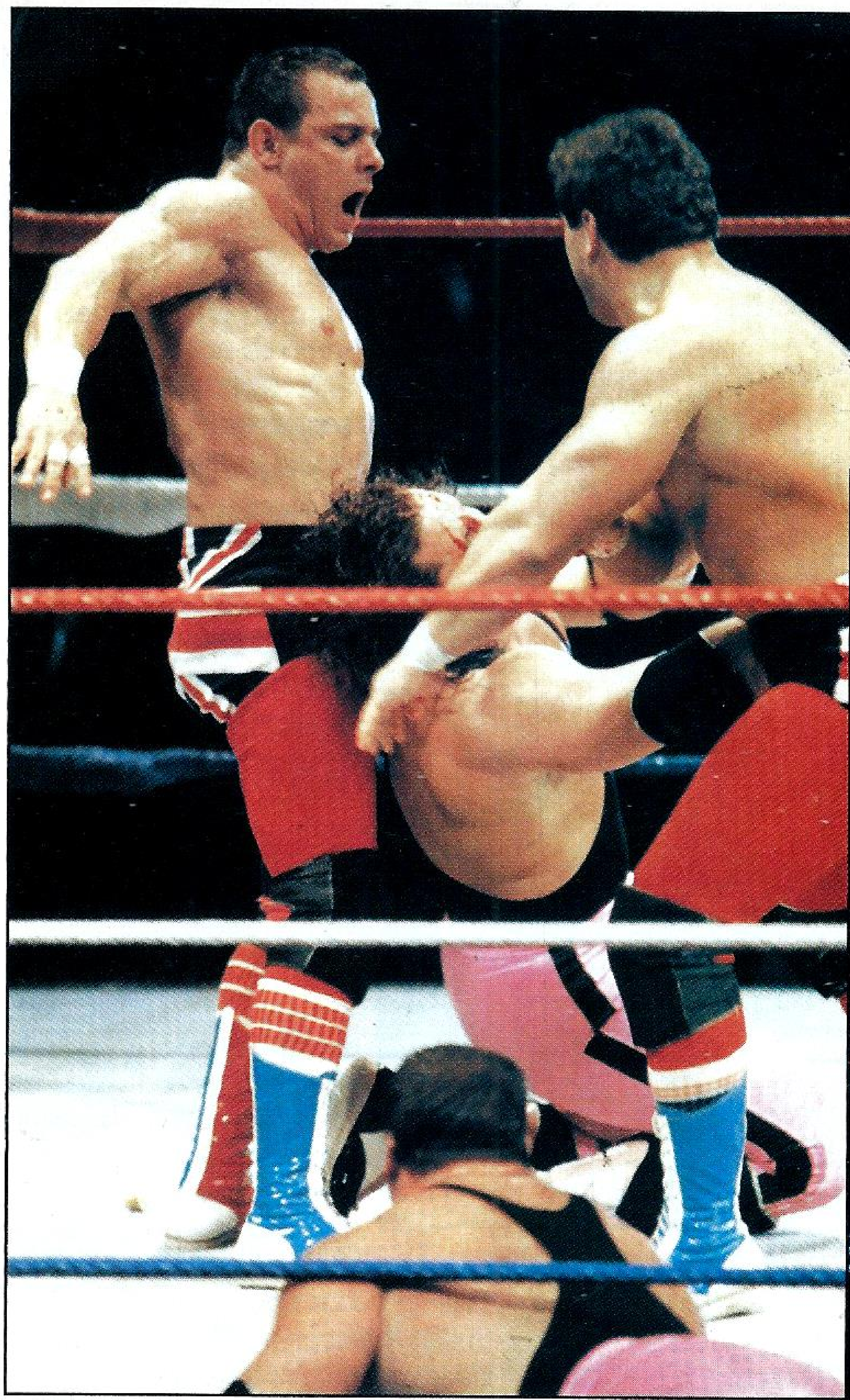
MELTZER: I'm not talking about the physical talent of the tag teams WWE has now. The issue here is more perception than anything. If WWE is going to make a tag team division into a division worth anything, it has to give us teams that stick together a while and aren't made up of guys who WWE has made it clear can't accomplish anything of note in the singles division. That's what we have now.

FRANK KREWDA: Bill has a point. Look at the two sets of champions. For Smackdown, John Morrison had a nice little run as ECW champ, but that's about it, and The Miz is more of a comedy guy. For Raw, you have Cody Rhodes, who was probably promoted from OVW too soon and has looked totally overmatched in most of his singles matches. And he's teaming with the journeyman of journeymen in Hardcore Holly. It's hard for fans to get behind any of these teams when they're treated as also-rans.

MELTZER: Exactly. Santino Marella is hilarious to watch, but he just isn't ready for a big push based on his ring skills, so they stick him in a tag team with Carlito, who always seems to be in someone's doghouse or something. I think we all saw what Paul London and Brian Kendrick could do as singles during their days in Ring of Honor. They were spectacular, but because of their lack of size, they're treated as half a step above preliminary wrestlers when they wrestle the top stars in singles matches. That's not how you build a tag team division. Twenty years ago, you felt like The British Bulldogs and Hart Foundation were wrestling in tag teams because that's what they dreamed of doing, and the belts really meant everything.

SAKS: So does anyone here have any hope given what we've seen in the last few months? Dave, you had an interesting idea for WWE's tag team division a while back.

LENKER: I'm assuming you mean unifying the Raw and Smackdown tag titles and having one tag title defended on the cards of all the brands. I still think that could work. I still like Kendrick and London a lot and think they could eventually take off in the kind of way The Hardy Boyz eventually did. I like Hawkins and Ryder, too, but only if they break away from Edge and Vickie



> **"WWE definitely has the roster depth to make tag team wrestling a big deal. It could always bring in developmental talent to make things even better. It wouldn't even have to be the top prospects. Just bring in some new guys and let them focus exclusively on tag team wrestling."**
>
> **—Dave Lenker**

The British Bulldogs and the Hart Foundation (above) stoked fans' enthusiasm for tag team wrestling because they obviously liked what they were doing. Santino Marella (right) is just one of many superstars who was pushed into a team not to build the quality of WWE's tag ranks, but to better establish him as a singles wrestler.

Guerrero. Make a big deal out of turning the two tag titles into one, put those two teams in there with Jimmy Wang Yang and Shannon Moore and Carlito and Marella and Deuce and Domino and the rest. That would at least give the tag team division a really nice kickstart. So, yes, I'm trying to be the optimist here.

KREWDA: I did a little research earlier today, and did you guys know that there has only been one tag team title defense total in the last four WrestleManias?

MELTZER: I wouldn't have even guessed that many.

KREWDA: Big Show and Kane successfully defended the Raw belts against Carlito and Chris Masters at WrestleMania 22.

SAKS: That's not exactly a trend that inspires optimism.

KREWDA: Not at all. And I think that match tells you a lot, too. Even when WWE tries to get behind a tag team division, it inevitably builds some kind of scenario where it's two singles superstars who get together and dominate for a while at the expense of legitimate teams. Kane and Big Show weren't what I would call a real team. Same for Randy Orton and Edge or Shawn Michaels and John Cena. Those two teams were recently Raw tag team champions. When you use the tag team division to make singles feuds more interesting, you do real damage that's hard to repair. I like the feud between Hardcore Holly and Cody Rhodes and Marella and Carlito, but I fully expect them to have a nice feud for a while, and just when it gets interesting, you'll have Cena and Triple-H team up for some reason to help heat up their singles feud, and they'll probably squash both teams plus The Highlanders plus London and Kendrick along the way. Then it's back to square one. Same thing could happen with Smackdown. I'm half-surprised The Undertaker and Batista never held the tag team belts together.

LENKER: I'll concede that WWE has a hard time keeping divisions separate. One big reason the cruiserweight division died a slow death is that WWE used the top cruiserweights as cannon fodder for the heavyweights way too often. You kill the credibility of the cruiserweights that way, and the same thing happens to the tag team guys.

KREWDA: You even had another gimmick kind of situation when Matt Hardy and MVP won the Smackdown tag team belts. They were arch-rivals at the time, and the story was that they thrived in spite of themselves. That was interesting, but it really didn't do much for any tag team division.

MELTZER: Realistically, the best bet here is that one team at least just gets really hot almost out of nowhere, and a solid tag team division kind of falls into place after that. The New Age Outlaws were the perfect example of that. Road Dogg and Billy Gunn were pretty much nobodies when they started teaming in the mid-1990s. Nobody cared about the team at all at first, but then they just got incredibly hot when DX took off, and tag teams meant something in WWE for a few years. But I think that was an accident.

SAKS: That's a good point. Going back to TNA for a second, they really do work hard to build the tag team division there. If you have someone like an A.J. Styles gunning for the tag team belts, people take notice and take it seriously.

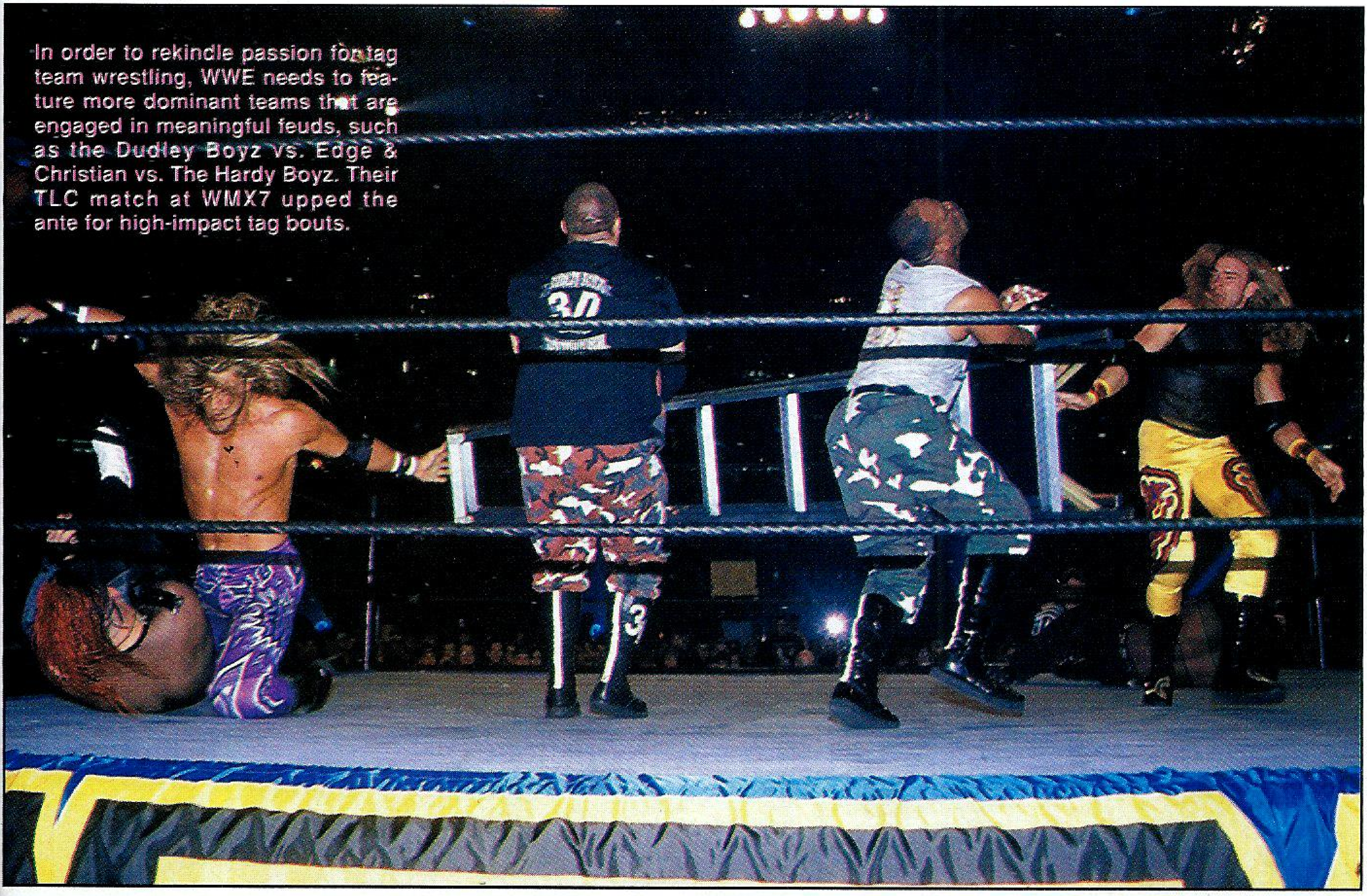
LENKER: It's a shame, really, because WWE definitely has the roster depth to make tag team wrestling a pretty big deal. It could always bring in some new developmental talent to make things even better. It wouldn't even have to be the top prospects. Just bring in some new guys and let them focus exclusively on tag team wrestling. It'd be nice to see the art of tag team wrestling brought back. By that I mean having guys work together to isolate an opponent in one part of the ring so that he can't make a tag, forcing the wrestler on the apron to keep holding on to the tag rope to make a legal tag—subtle stuff like that made tag team wrestling so different from the singles stuff.

KREWDA: I think you might be dreaming there, Dave. I think if any young tag team wrestler in WWE suddenly got hot, he'd be moved to the singles division ASAP.

LENKER: Probably right. I'm just saying it made tag team wrestling an art and made a tag team specialist just what the term implies—something special.

SAKS: I must say I was hoping to come out of this meeting feeling a little more optimistic.

MELTZER: I think we all wish we could feel that way. I guess we'll just have to hope WWE proves most of us here wrong. □



In order to rekindle passion for tag team wrestling, WWE needs to feature more dominant teams that are engaged in meaningful feuds, such as the Dudley Boyz vs. Edge & Christian vs. The Hardy Boyz. Their TLC match at WMX7 upped the ante for high-impact tag bouts.

Photo by Mark W. Hill

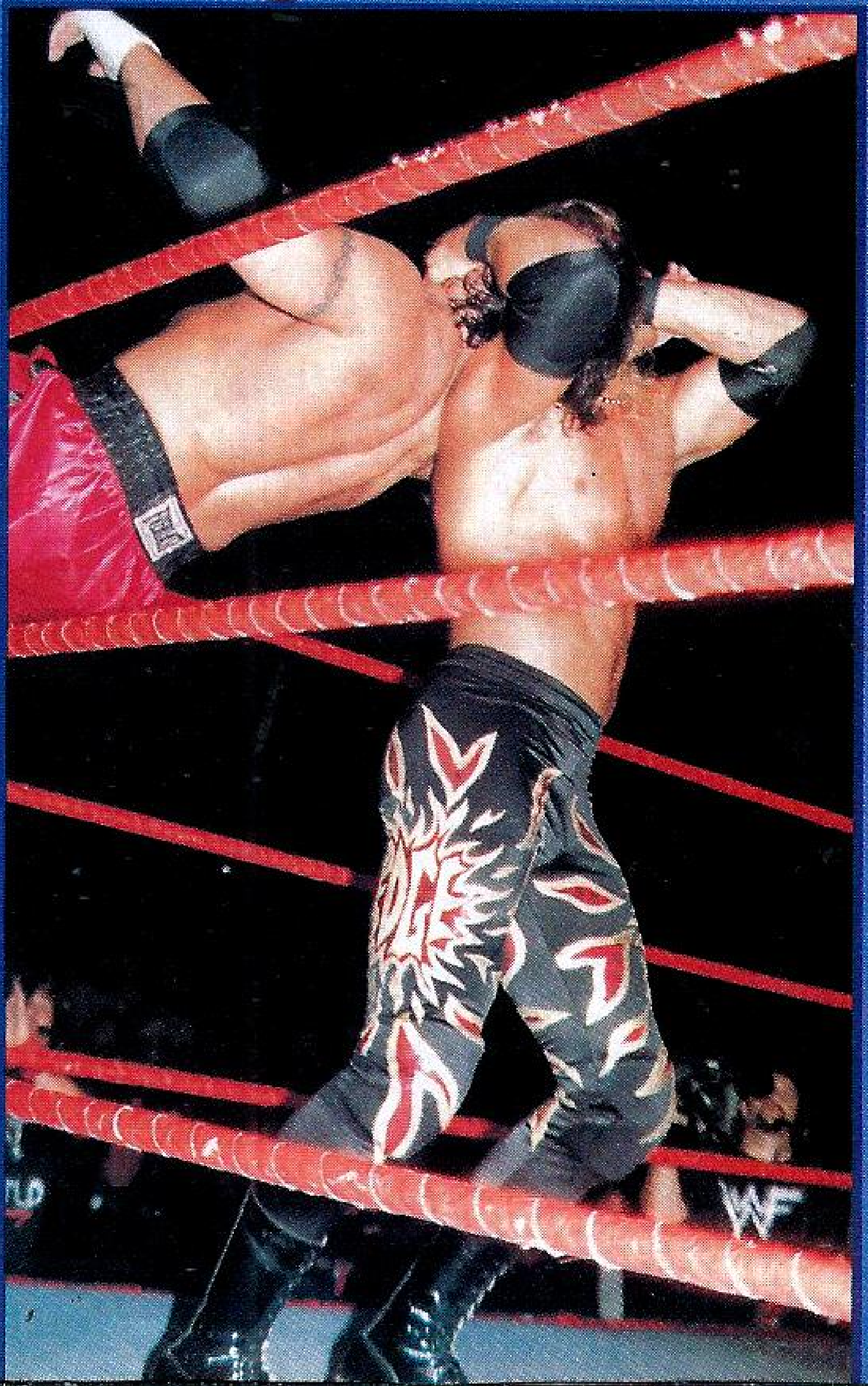
wrestling timeline

JUNE 22, 1998:
After wrestling as Sexton Hardcastle in the independents, Edge makes his WWE television debut on an episode of Raw, defeating Jose Estrada by countout.

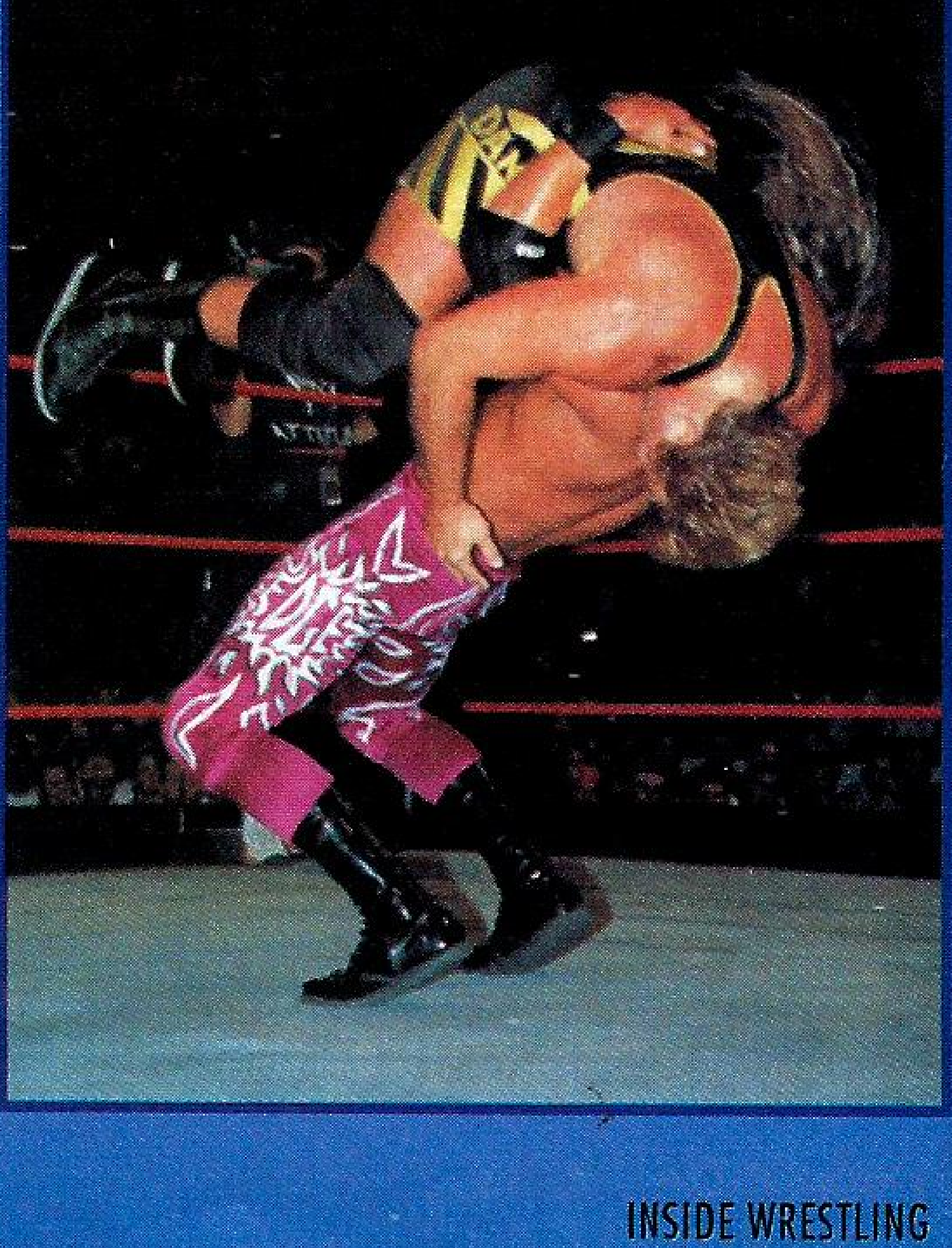
MAY 16, 1999:
Edge, Christian, and Gangrel's Brood falls to The Undertaker's Ministry at WWE's No Mercy pay-per-view.

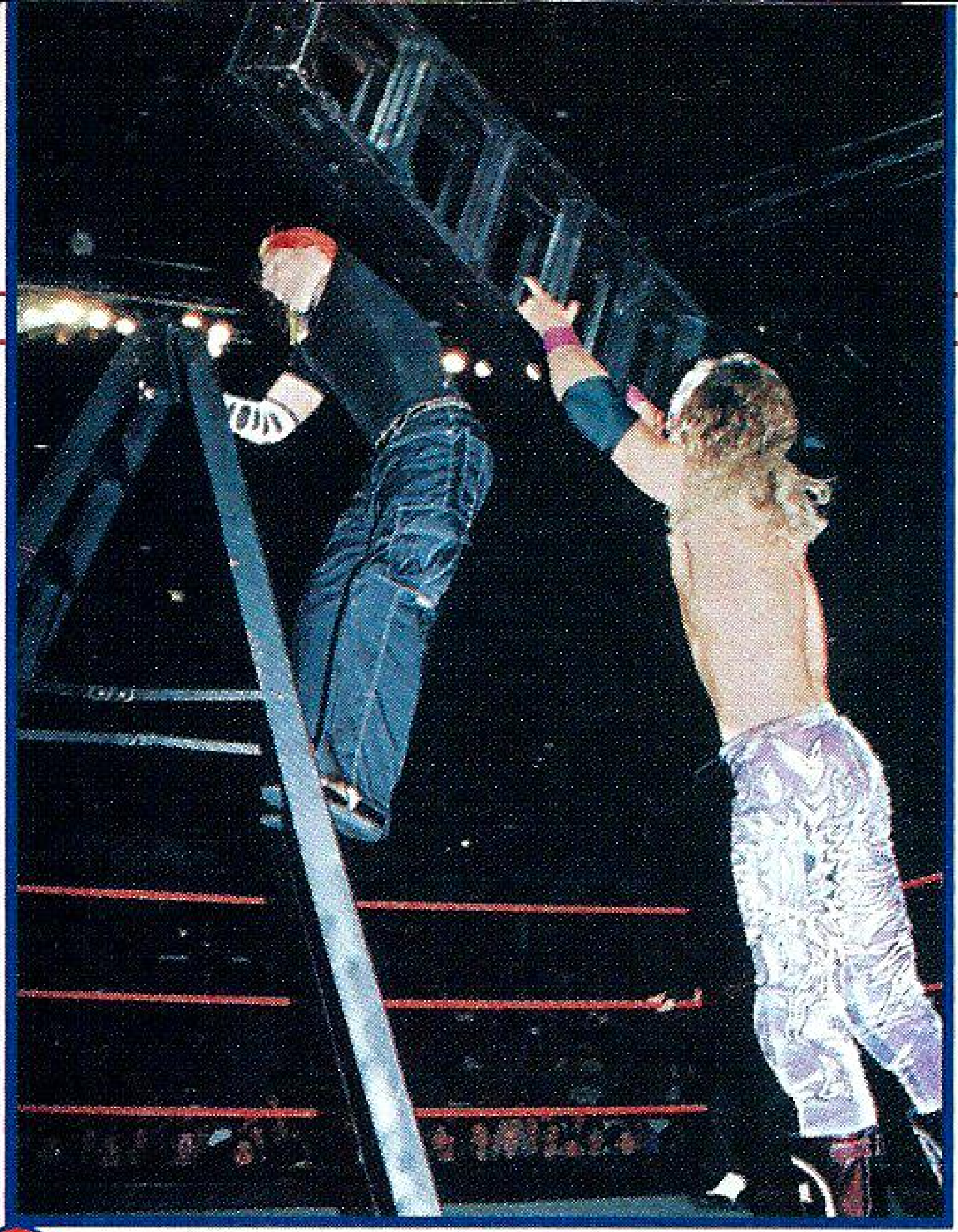
OCTOBER 30, 1973:
Adam Copeland is born in Orangeville, Ontario, Canada.

AUGUST 30, 1998:
Appearing as Sable's mystery tag partner, Edge makes his WWE pay-per-view debut at SummerSlam 1998.



SEPTEMBER 27, 1998:
Distracted by his former indies partner, Christian, Edge loses to Owen Hart at WWE's In Your House: Breakdown pay-per-view.





Edge

***Inside Wrestling* journeys back in time to examine the career of a superstar who has left a major imprint on the sport.**

OCTOBER 17, 1999:
After the demise of The Brood, Edge and Christian pair exclusively as a tag team. The duo loses to their greatest rivals, The Hardy Boyz, in the finals of the Terri Invitational tournament.

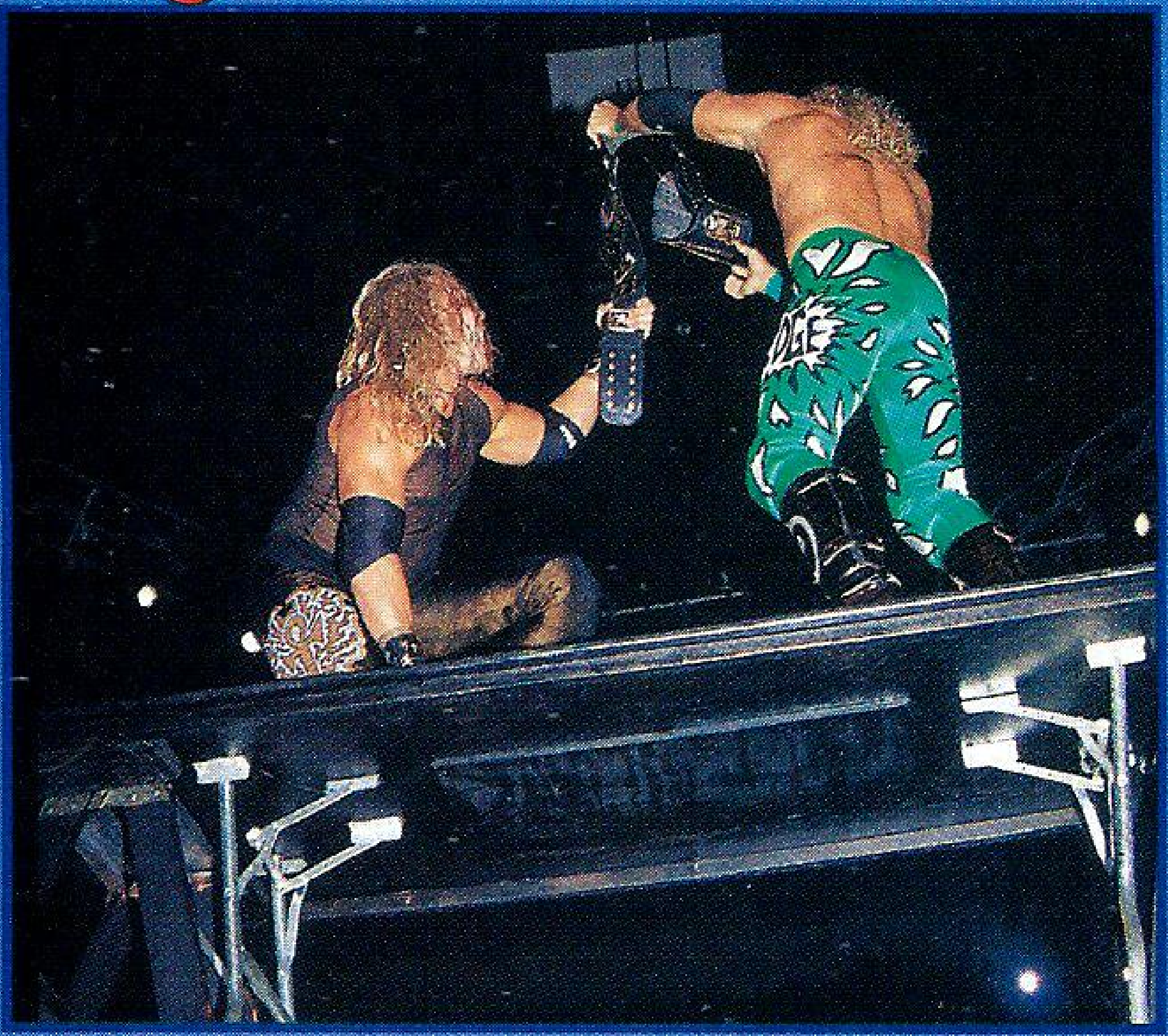
AUGUST 27, 2000:
In the first ever TLC match, Edge and Christian retain the tag team championship by once again beating the Hardys and the Dudleys, this time at SummerSlam.

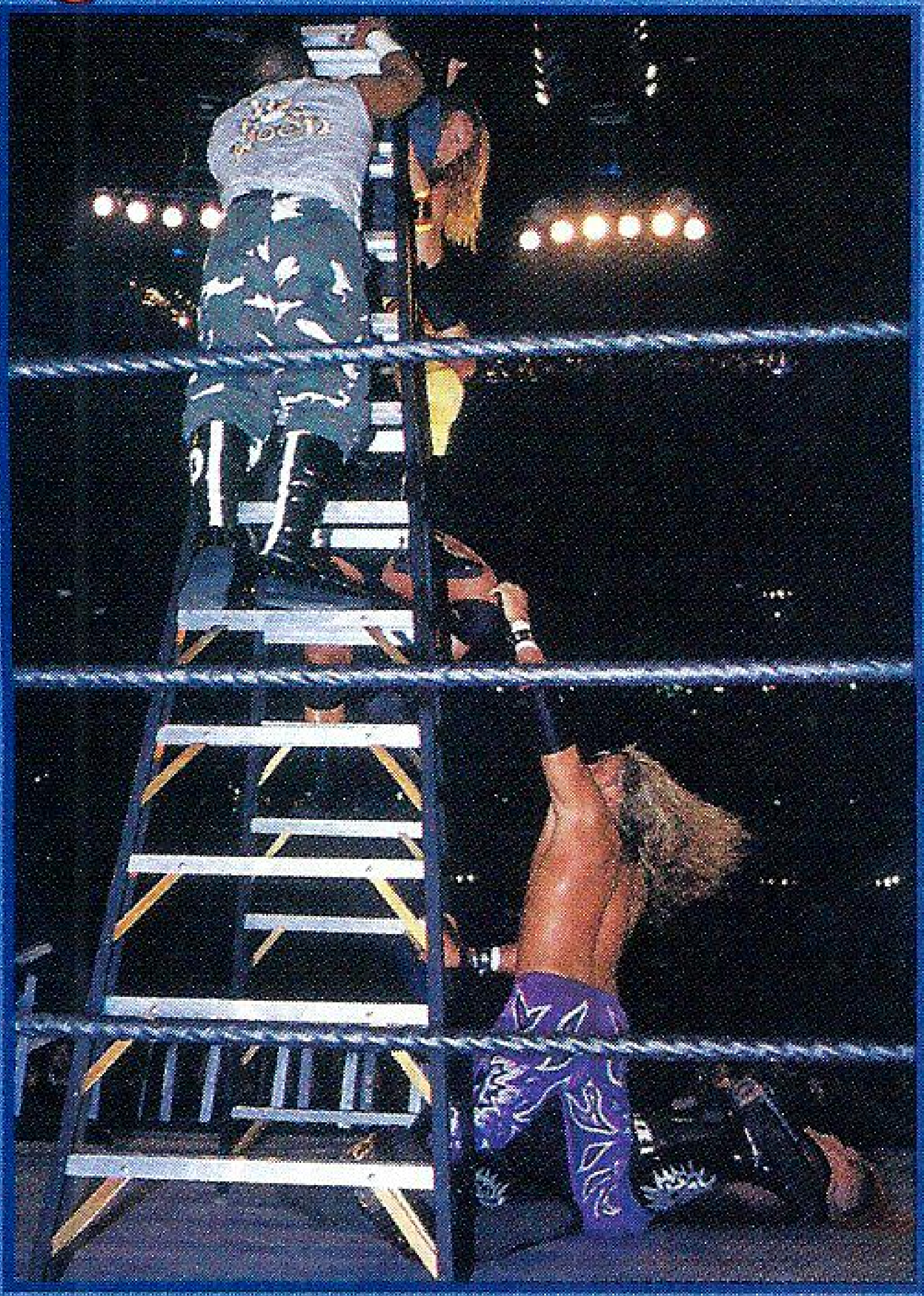
JUNE 25, 2001:
Edge becomes the 2001 King of the Ring by defeating Kurt Angle in the final round.

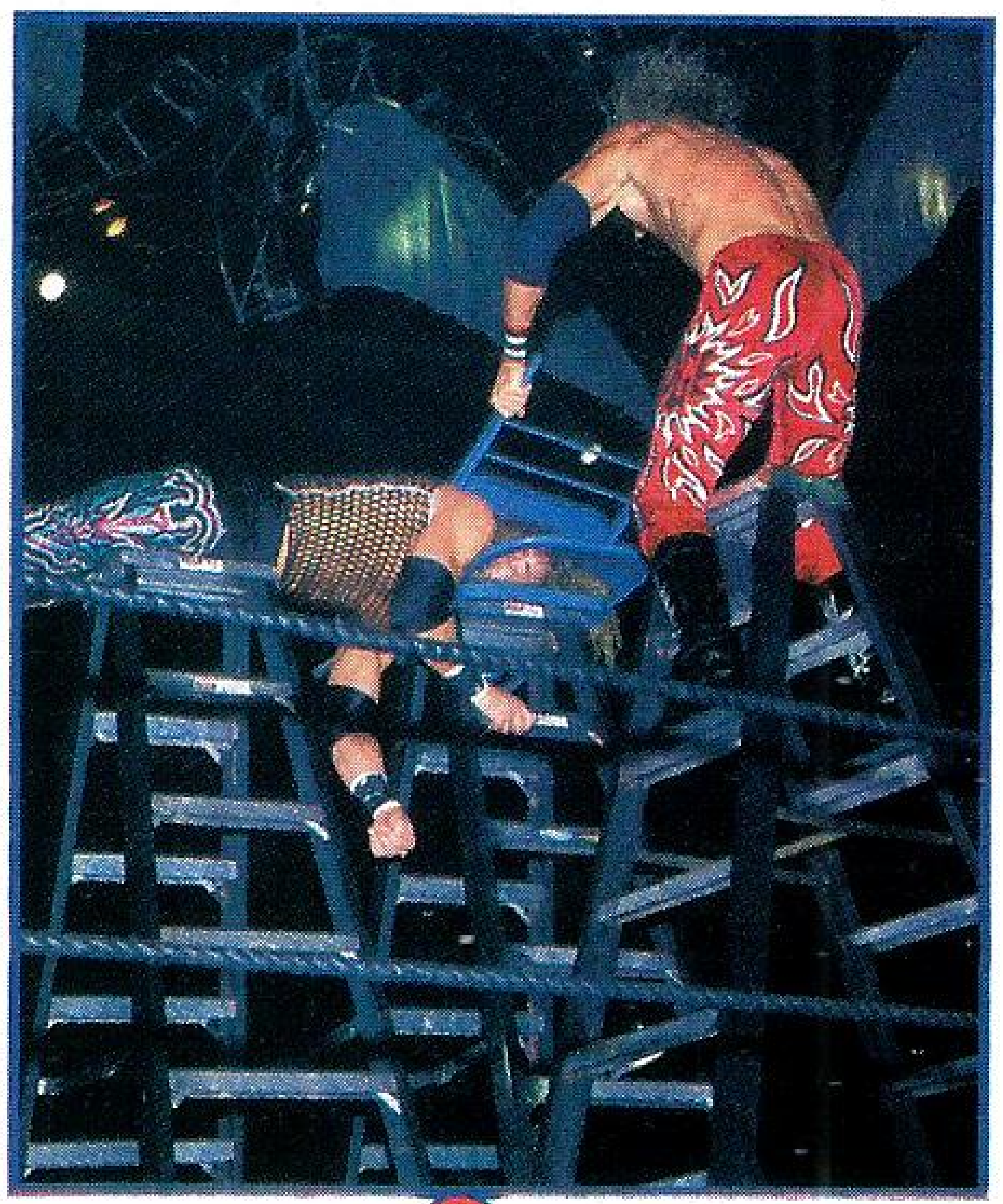
APRIL 2, 2000:
Winning the first of their seven WWF World tag team championships, Edge and Christian defeat the Hardys and The Dudley Boyz at WrestleMania 2000 in a "Triangle Ladder" match.

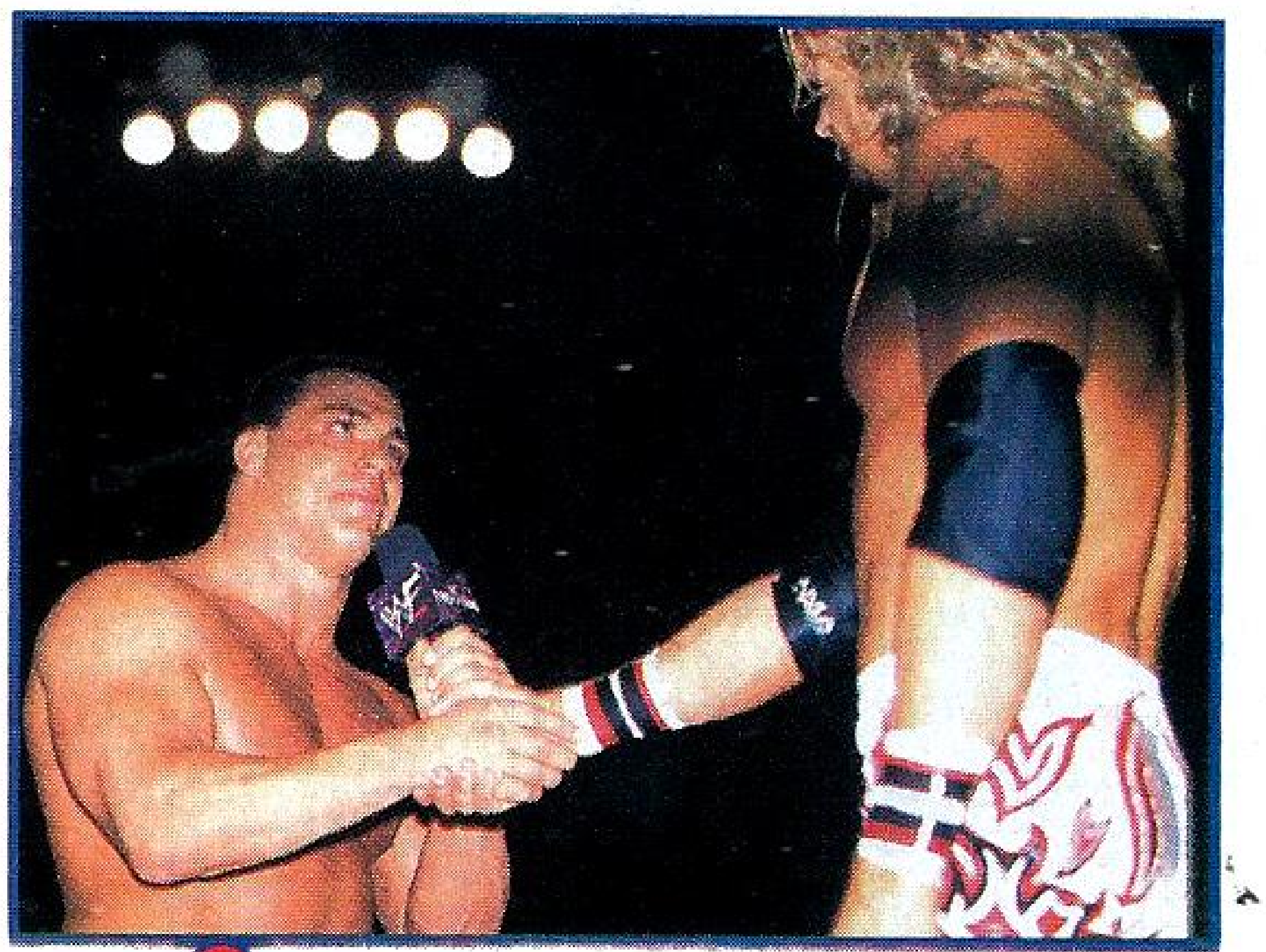
OCTOBER 22, 2000:
Edge and Christian wrestle under disguise as The Conquistadors and recapture the WWF World tag team title from The Hardys at No Mercy. The duo had been banned from challenging the Hardys for the gold, which prompted the ruse.

APRIL 1, 2001:
In the second TLC match among the three teams, Edge and Christian are victorious once again over the Hardys and The Dudley Boyz, winning the tag team straps for the seventh and final time together.









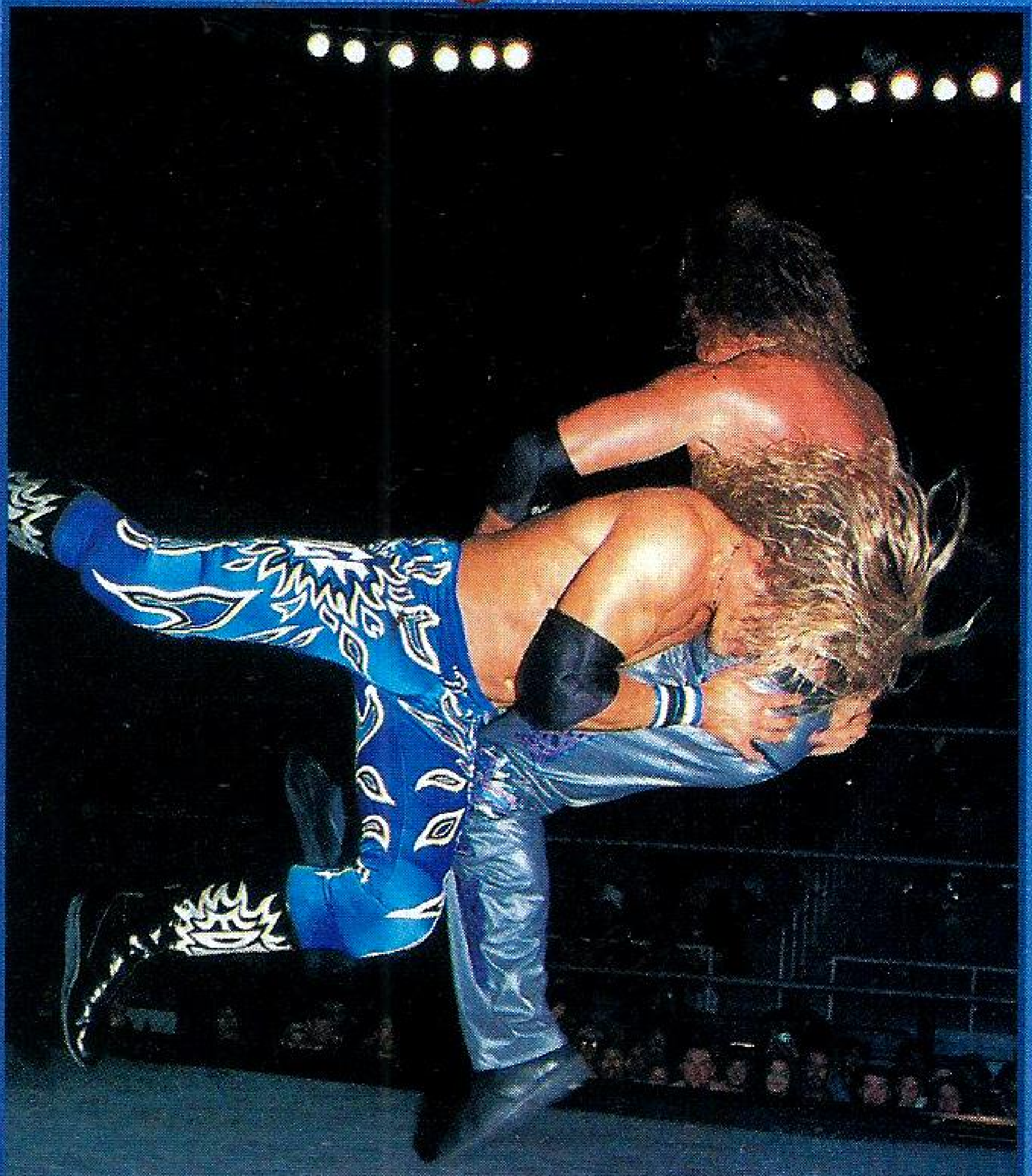
OCTOBER 21, 2001:
After a contentious split, Edge recaptures the Intercontinental strap from Christian in a ladder match at No Mercy.

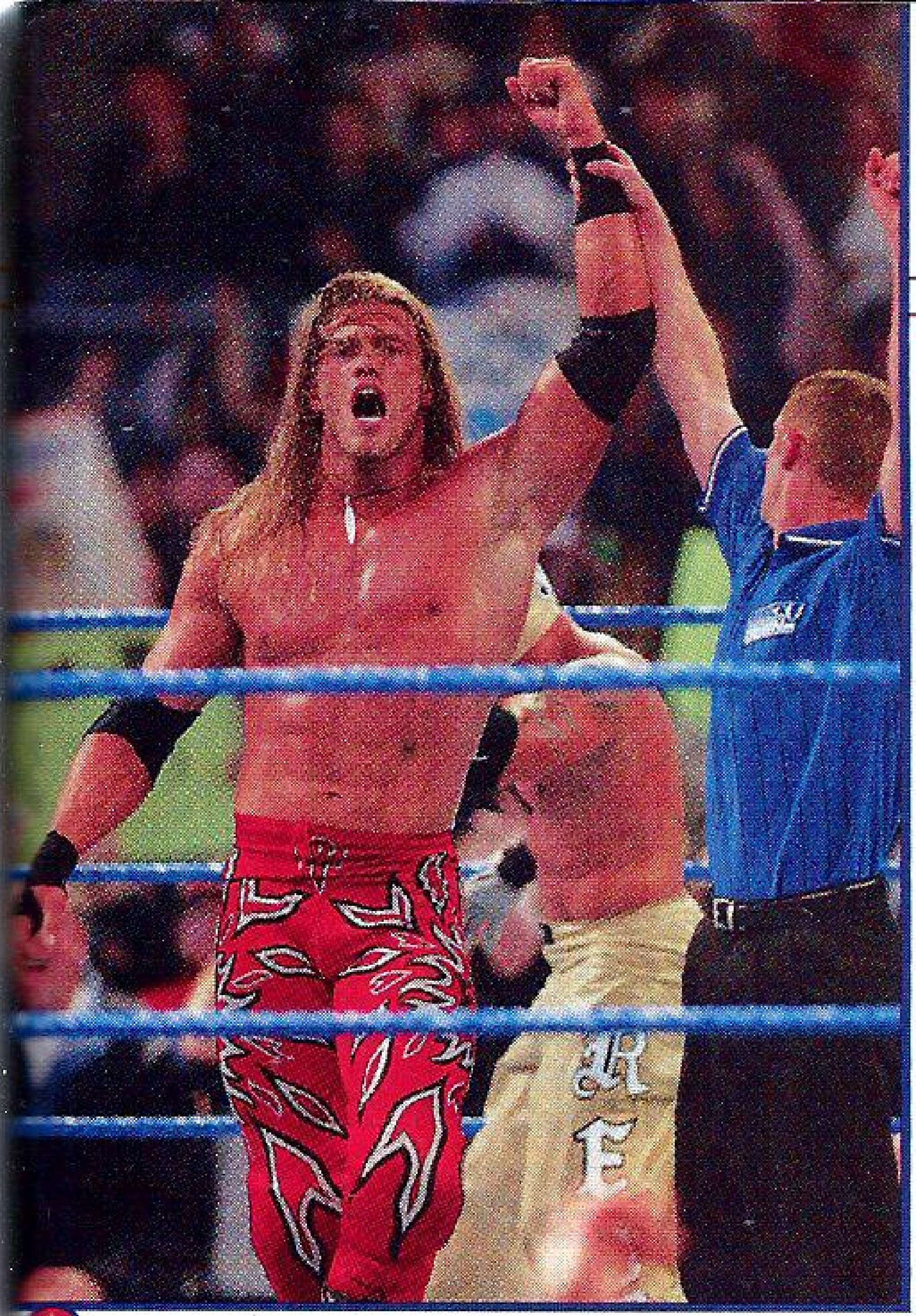
MAY 19, 2002:
In a hair-vs.-hair match at Judgment Day, Edge beats Kurt Angle who is later subdued and shaved bald.

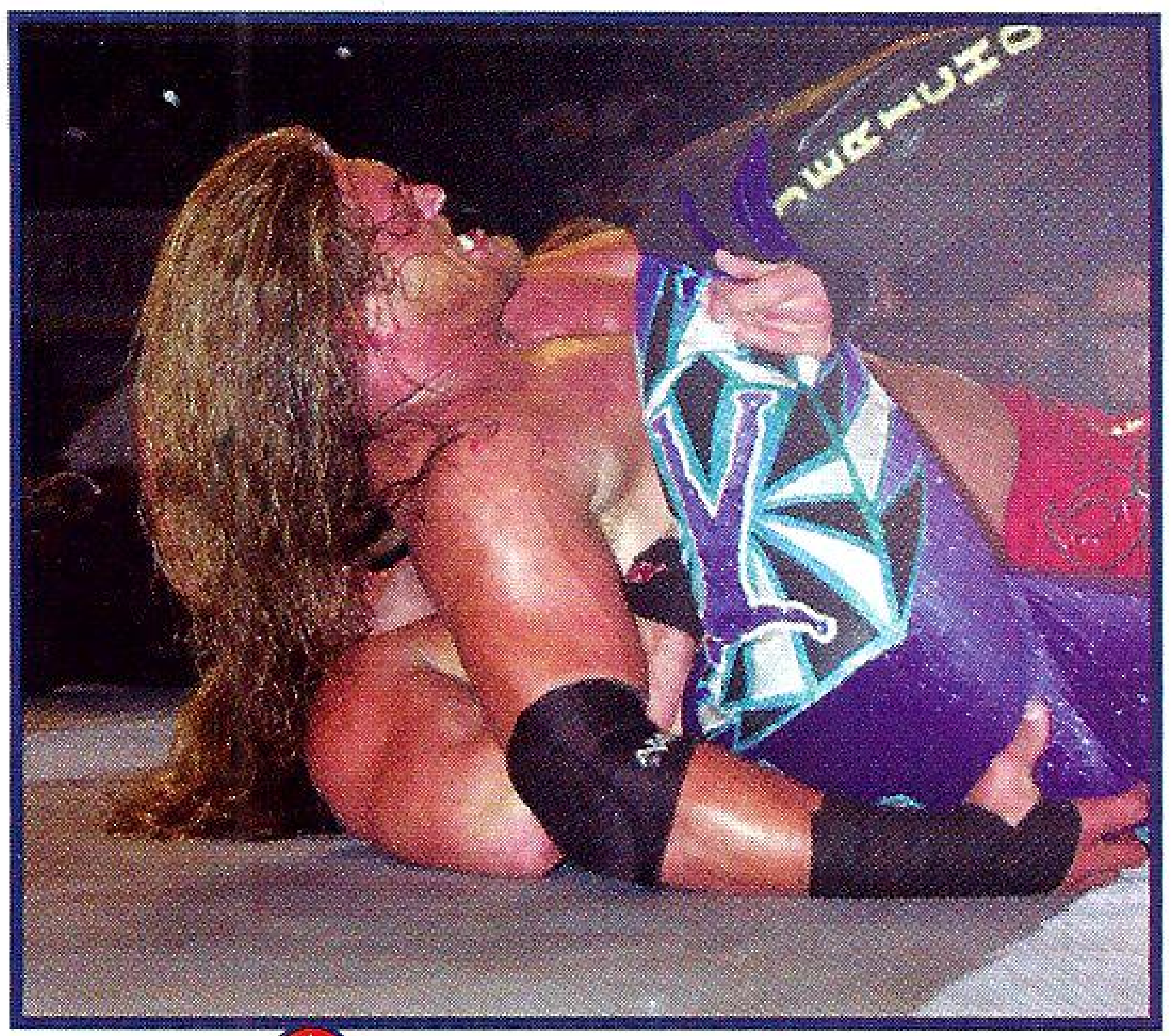
JULY 4, 2002:
Paired with unlikely partner Hulk Hogan, Edge captures the WWE World tag team championship yet again, defeating Billy and Chuck on an episode of Smackdown.

AUGUST 19, 2001:
Edge captures his greatest individual WWF championship to date by winning the Intercontinental title from Lance Storm at SummerSlam.

NOVEMBER 18, 2001:
At the Survivor Series pay-per-view, U.S. champion Edge defeats Intercontinental champion Test to unify the titles.







NOVEMBER 7, 2002:
Edge teams with Rey Mysterio Jr. to defeat Kurt Angle and Chris Benoit for the Smackdown World tag team championship.

APRIL 19, 2004:
It doesn't take Edge long to recapture championship gold as he and Chris Benoit win the Raw World tag team championship from Evolution members Ric Flair and Batista on Raw.

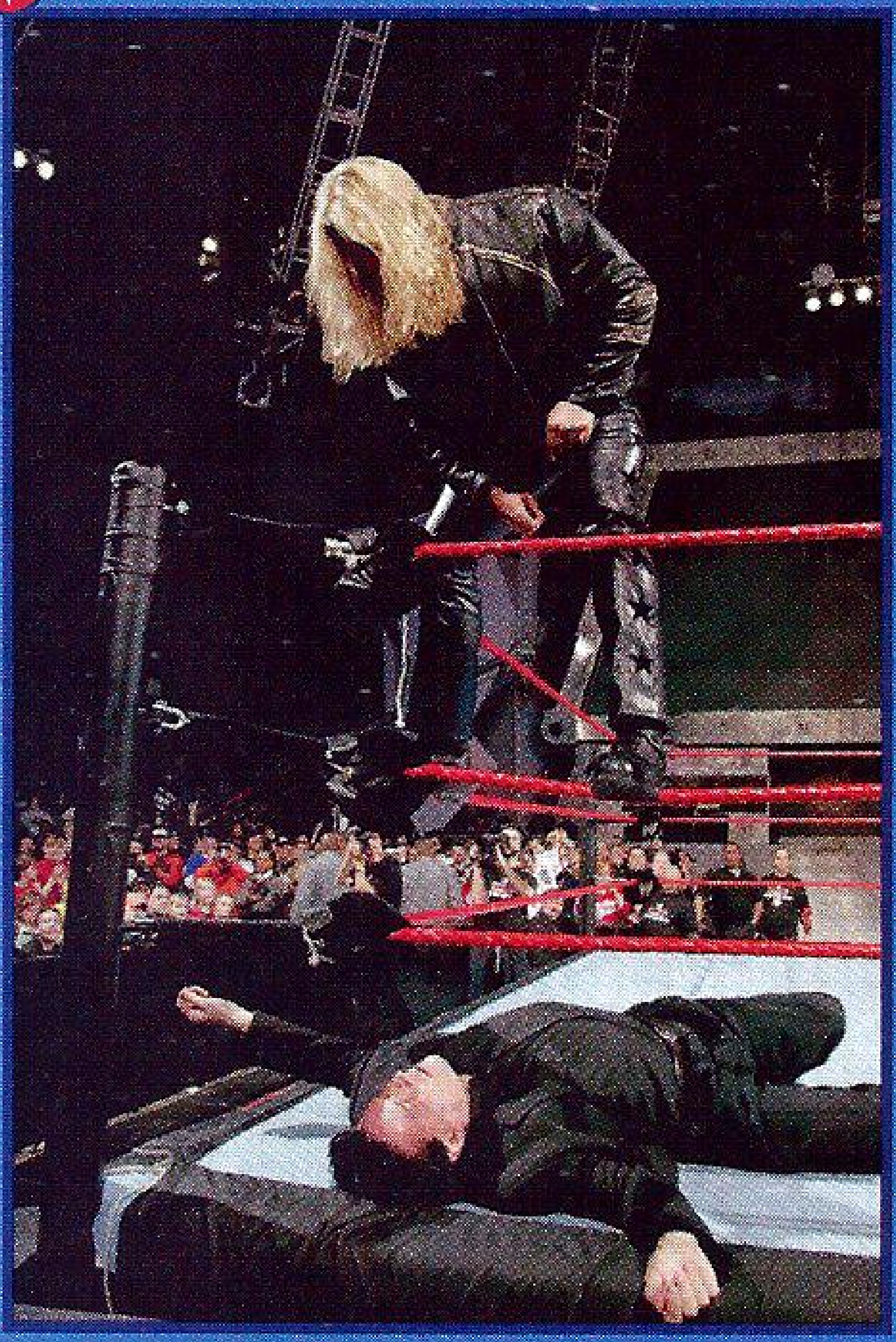
AUGUST 18, 2004
Edge retains his I-C title at SummerSlam by defeating Chris Jericho and Batista in a triple-threat match.

FEBRUARY 13, 2003:
Following a loss to Charlie Haas on Smackdown, it is revealed that Edge will undergo neck surgery and will miss at least the next full year.

MARCH 22, 2004:
No one expects to see Edge at the WWE Draft Lottery on Raw, especially Eric Bischoff, who is speared after drafting the returning star to the Monday night roster.

JULY 11, 2004:
Edge captures the Intercontinental championship once again by defeating Randy Orton at Vengeance.

OCTOBER 11, 2004:
Turning against teammates Shawn Michaels and Chris Benoit, Edge steals the victory for his team and celebrates alone prior to attacking the duo on an episode of Raw.



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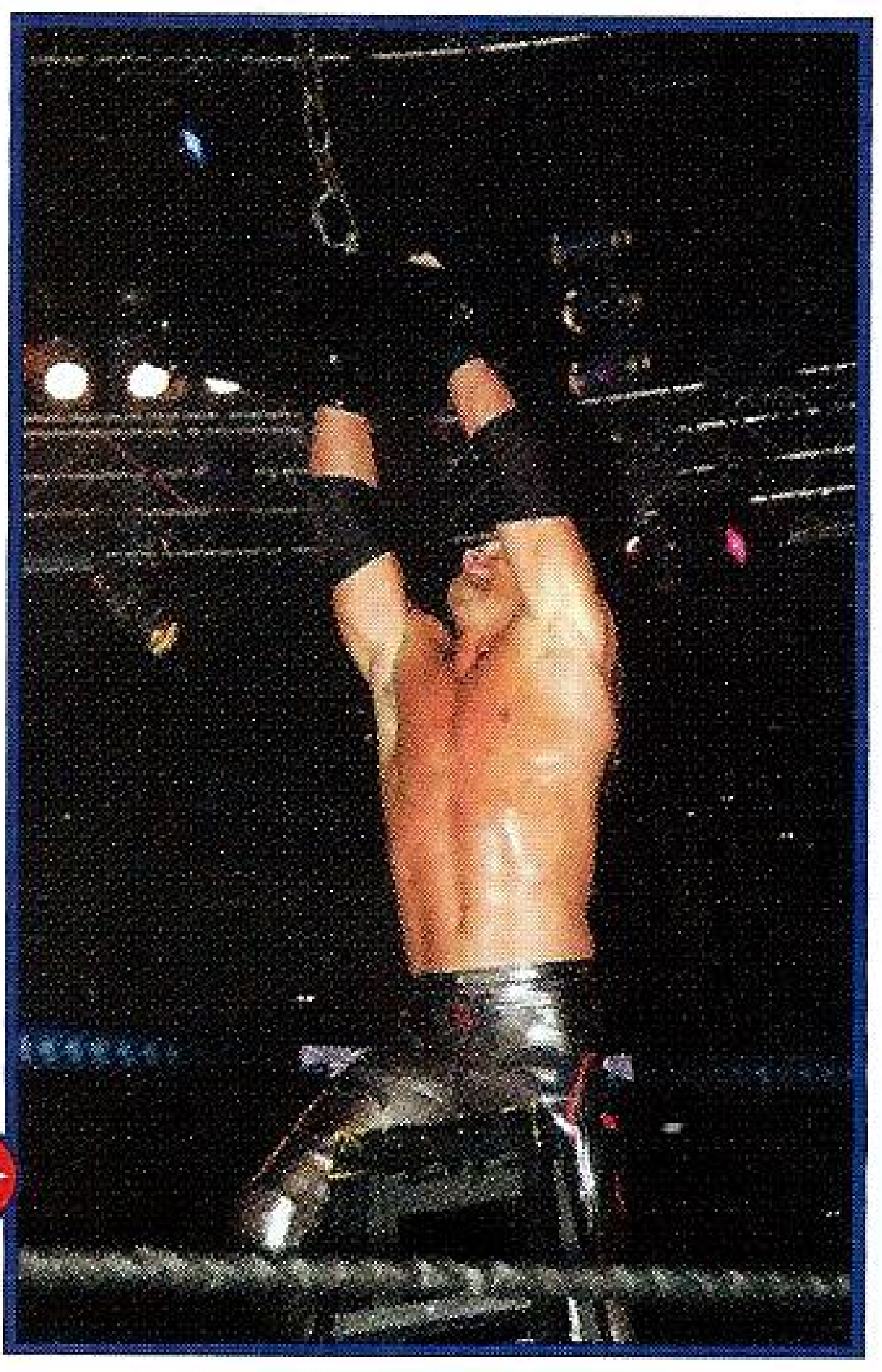
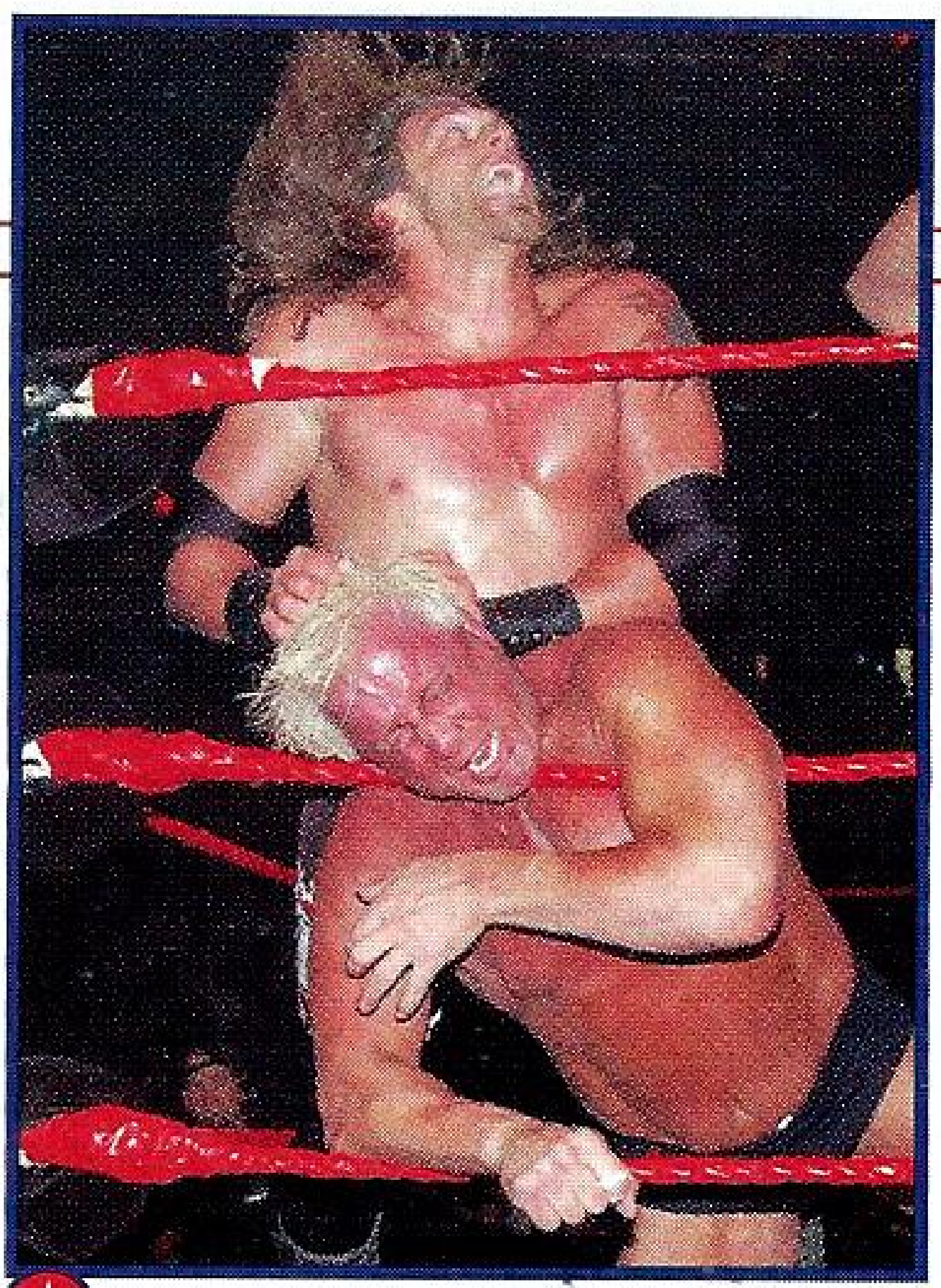
wrestling timeline



APRIL 3, 2005:
In what would become the inaugural "Money In The Bank" ladder match, Edge outlasts five other competitors to capture a guaranteed world title shot at some point over the next calendar year.

AUGUST 21, 2005:
After being re-signed by Vince McMahon, Matt Hardy—Lita's former boyfriend and Edge's former friend—is beaten by Edge at SummerSlam.

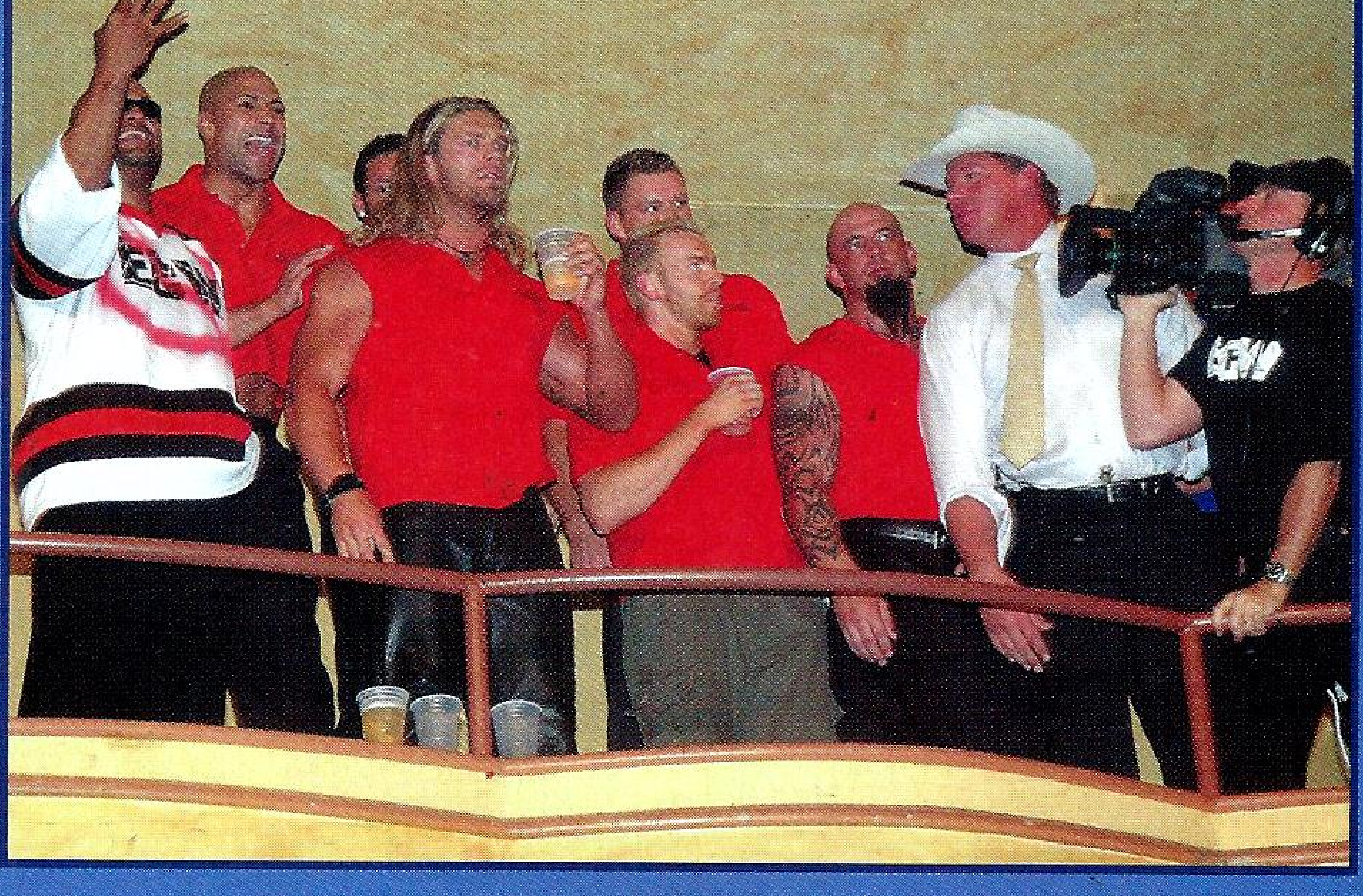


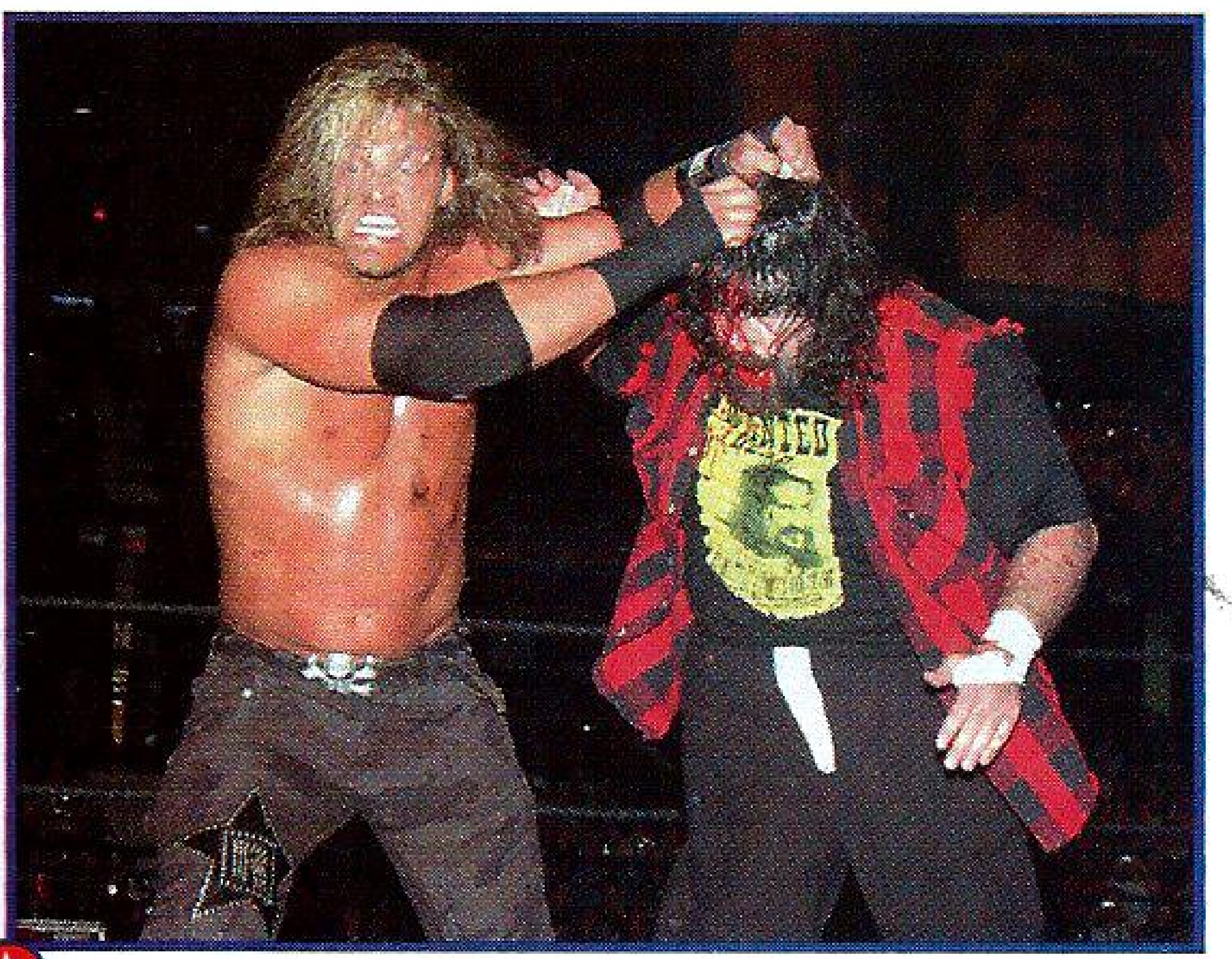
JANUARY 8, 2006:
Edge has the greatest night of his WWE career, defeating Ric Flair in a grudge match earlier in the evening, then cashing in his guaranteed title shot to beat a battered and bloodied John Cena—who had just won the "Elimination Chamber" match—for his first Raw World championship.

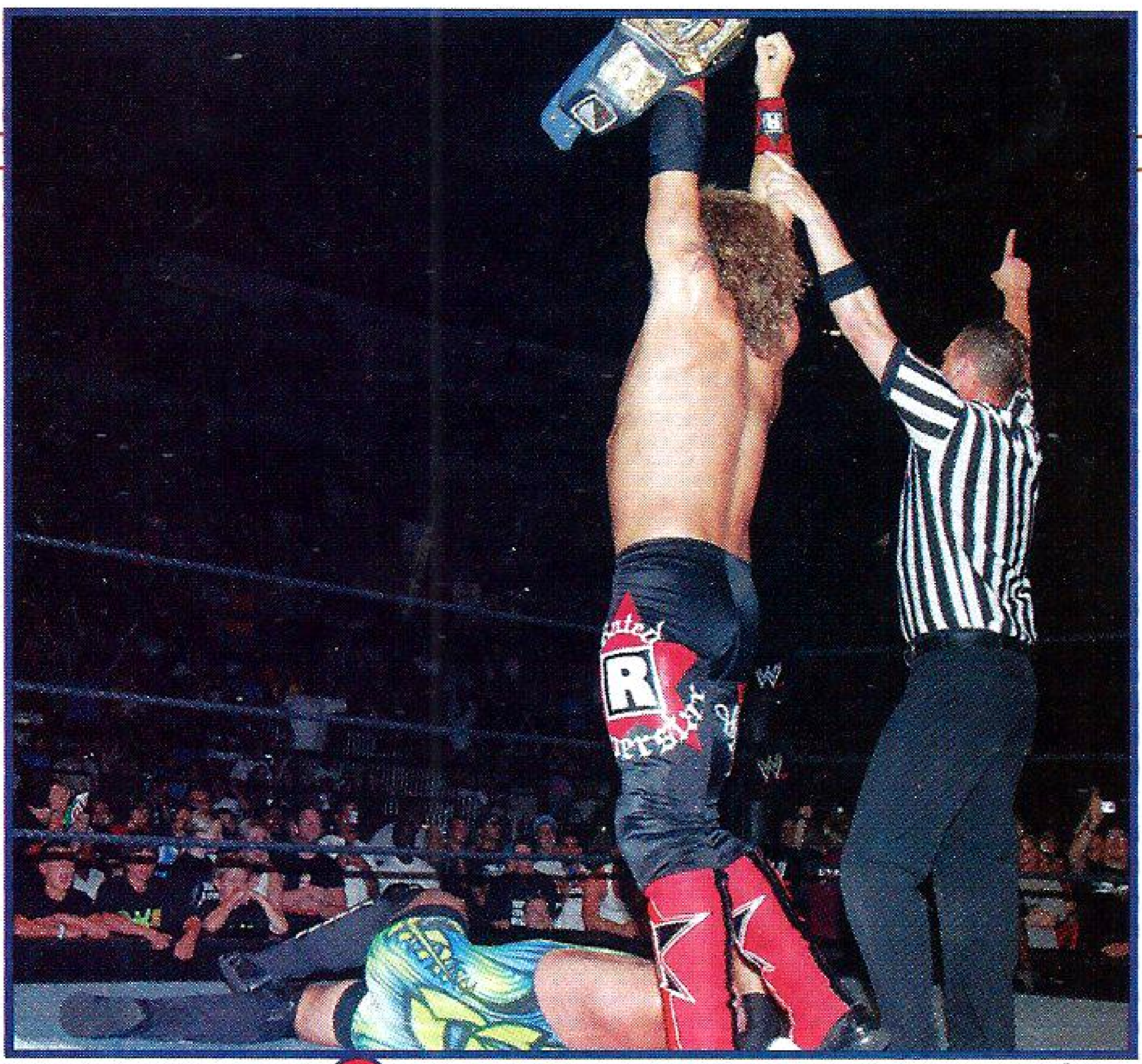
MAY 16, 2005:
Art imitated life when Edge became romantically involved with Lita—who was dating Kane on Raw—and used her to defeat the "Big Red Machine" in the finals of the Gold Rush tournament.

JUNE 12, 2005:
Edge is part of an anti-ECW contingent that infiltrates the One Night Stand pay-per-view in the Hammerstein Ballroom.

OCTOBER 3, 2005:
In a "Money In The Bank/Loser Leaves Raw" match, Edge defeats Matt Hardy once again.







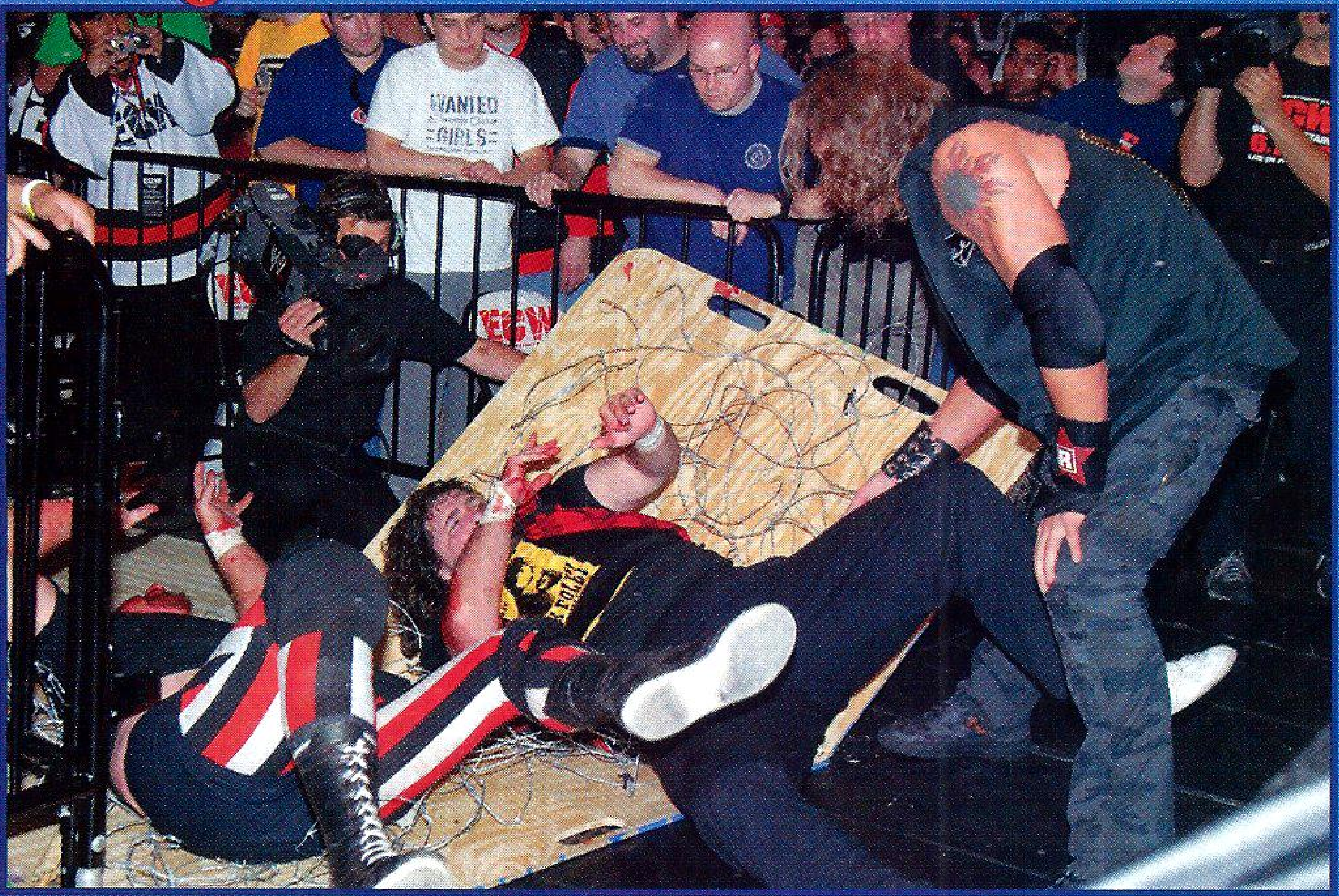
APRIL 2, 2006:
In a hardcore match at WrestleMania 22, where he was an obvious underdog, Edge defeats Mick Foley in a brutal contest that sees the former Mankind thrown through a flaming table.

JUNE 13, 2006:
Edge and Lita appear on the first episode of WWE's ECW on Sci Fi and spear newly crowned champion Rob Van Dam.

JULY 3, 2006:
By defeating John Cena and Rob Van Dam in a three-way match on Raw, Edge becomes a two-time Raw World champion.

JUNE 11, 2006:
Edge, Lita, and Foley defeat hardcore legends Tommy Dreamer, Beulah, and Terry Funk in a six-person mixed tag hardcore match at ECW's second One Night Stand pay-per-view.

SEPTEMBER 17, 2006:
Loses the Raw World championship back to Cena at Unforgiven in a TLC match.



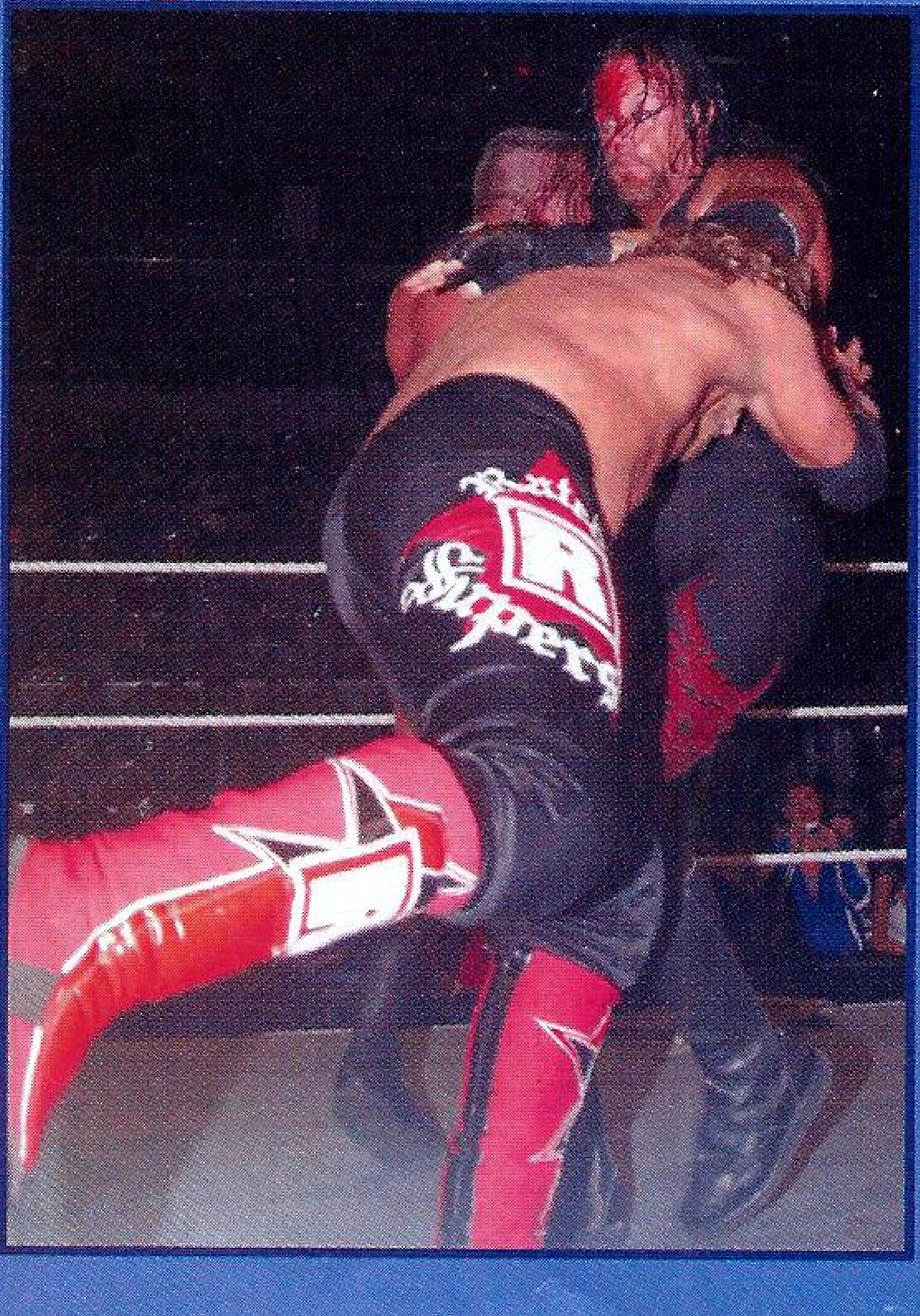
wrestling timeline

NOVEMBER 13, 2006:
As part of Rated RKO with Randy Orton, Edge wins the Raw World tag team title from Ric Flair in a handicap match. Flair's partner, Roddy Piper, could not compete due to injury.

APRIL 1, 2007:
After winning a "Last Chance" battle royal to enter the match, Edge cannot recapture the "Money In The Bank" guaranteed title shot at WrestleMania 23. The contest is won by Ken Kennedy, who eventually loses the briefcase to Edge.

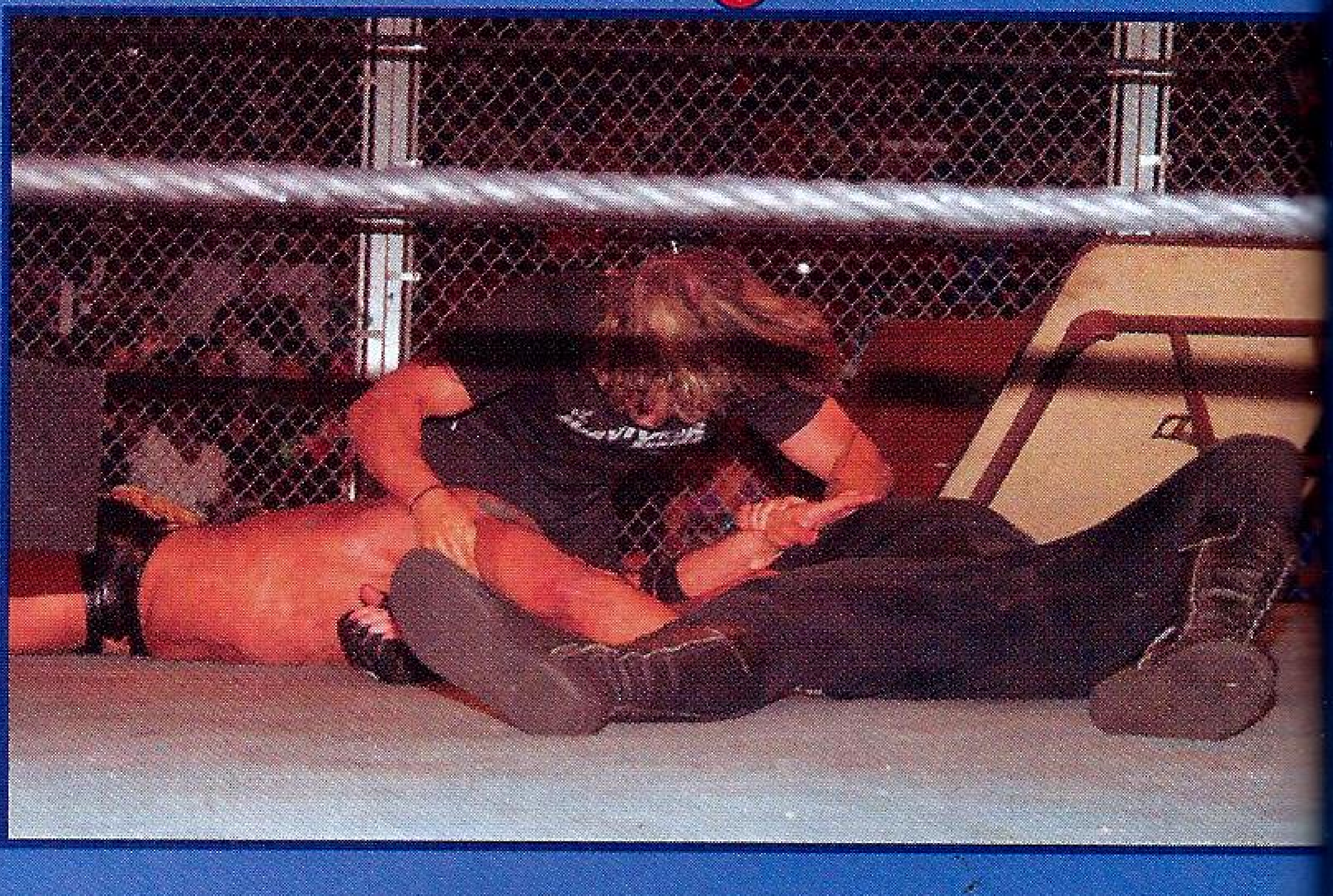
JULY 20, 2007:
Edge is forced to forfeit the Smackdown World championship when it is revealed that he has torn a pectoral muscle and will require surgery.

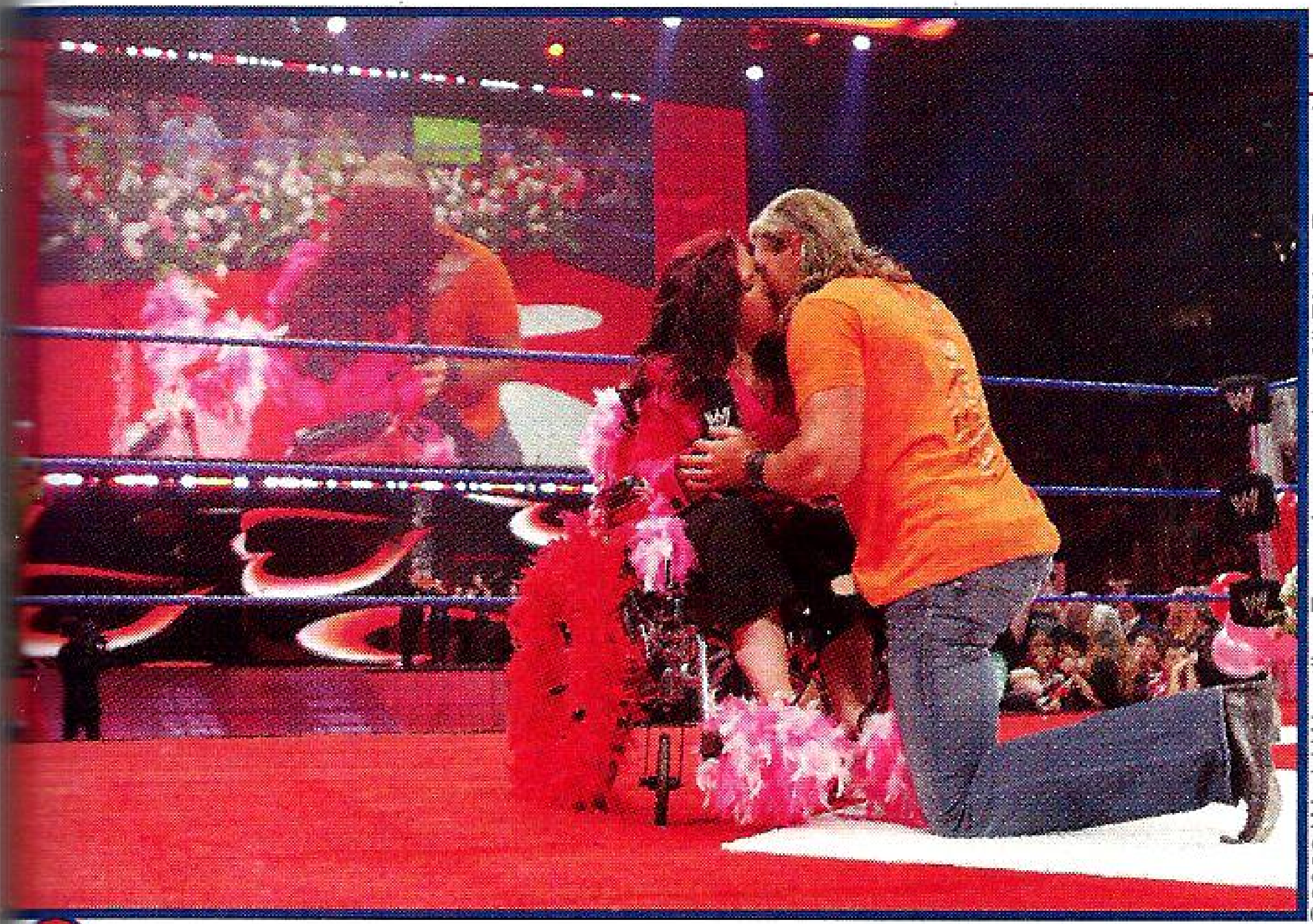
JANUARY 28, 2007:
Edge makes it to the final four of the Royal Rumble after starting as the number-five overall entrant; however, he is eliminated by Shawn Michaels.



MAY 11, 2007:
Edge capitalizes on a Mark Henry beatdown of The Undertaker to cash in his guaranteed title shot and win the Smackdown World title.

NOVEMBER 18, 2007:
Returning from pectoral surgery, Edge interferes in the "Hell In A Cell" match at Survivor Series between The Undertaker and Batista, costing the "Dead Man" the bout.





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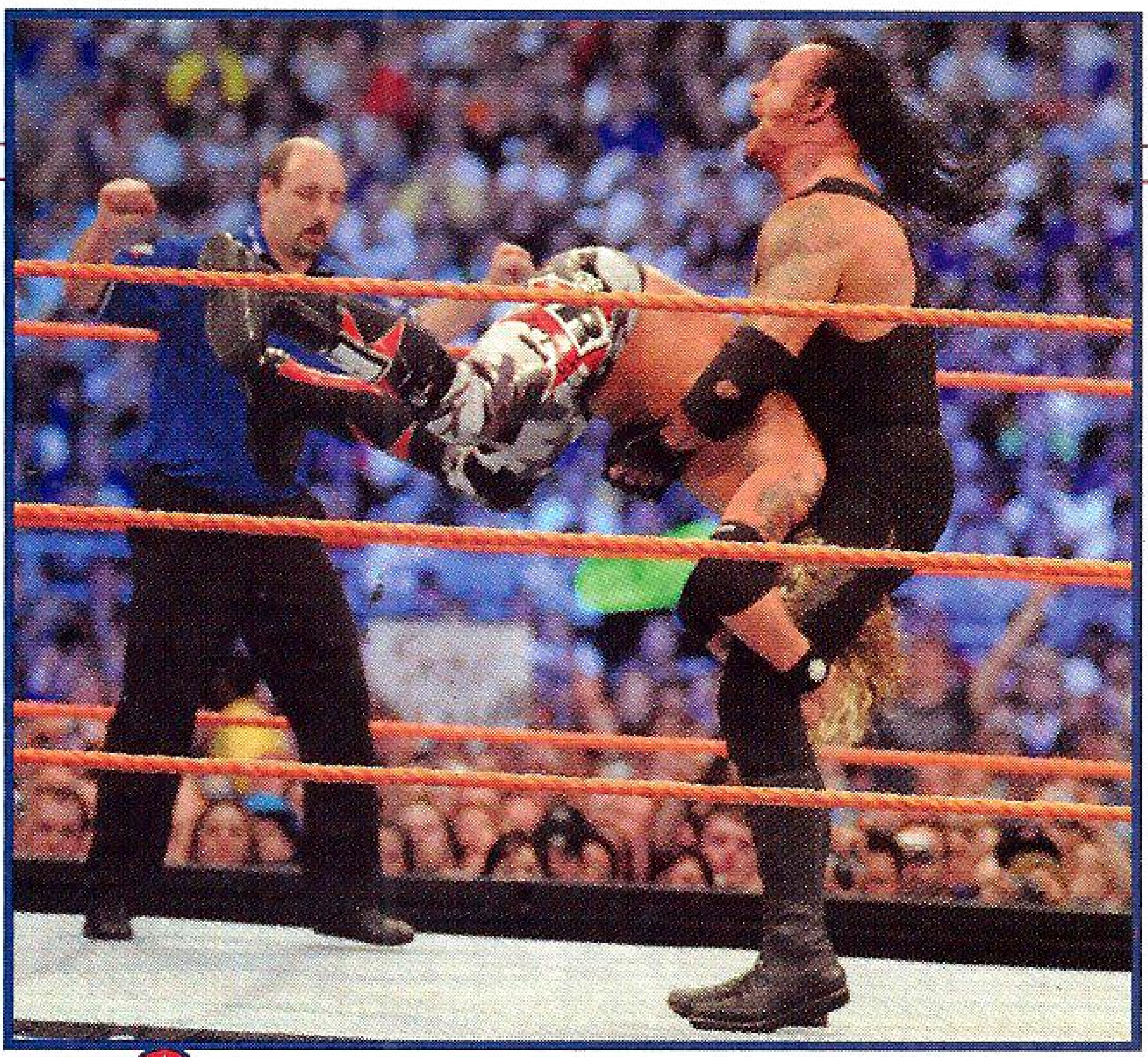
NOVEMBER 23, 2007:
Edge and Smackdown's interim general manager go public with an illicit affair that would see Vickie Guerrero favor her paramour in nearly every decision she made moving forward.

DECEMBER 16, 2007:
Edge captures his third world championship—second as a member of Smackdown—when he defeats Batista and The Undertaker in a triple-threat match at Armageddon.



MARCH 30, 2008:
Edge cannot end The Undertaker's WrestleMania undefeated streak and he is forced to tap out to "The Phenom's" *gogoplata*, costing him the Smackdown World championship.

JANUARY 22, 2008:
The strange bonding of Edge with both Vickie and Chavo Guerrero Jr. is given a name—La Familia—after the Smackdown World champion assists Chavo in capturing the ECW title.

APRIL 27, 2008:
In a rematch from WrestleMania 24, Edge once again taps out to The Undertaker's controversial chokehold and fails to capture the Smackdown World championship. Vickie Guerrero later strips 'Taker of the title.

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ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended May 30, 2008

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

ALL JAPAN INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JOE DOERING & KEIJI MUTO
(January 3, 2008; from Satoshi Kojima & TARU; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: RYUJI HIJIKATA
(April 29, 2008; from Silver King; Aichi, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: KOHEI SUWAMA
(April 29, 2008; from Kensuke Sasaki; Nagoya, Japan)

AMERICAN WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: LARRY ZBYSZKO
(February 5, 2008; awarded the title by AWA Superstars of Wrestling; Minneapolis, MN)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: GLEN OSBOURNE
(April 5, 2008; from Mr. Scott Wright; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: GLEN OSBOURNE
(May 10, 2008; defeated Ace Darling; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: BRYAN & MATT LOGAN
(December 1, 2007; from Max Von Bauer & Kermon the German; Newark, DE)

ECW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KANE
(March 29, 2008; from Chavo Guerrero Jr.; Orlando, FL)

FCW FLORIDA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: JAKE HAGER
(March 22, 2008; defeated Southern heavyweight champion Heath Miller to unify and disband the Southern heavyweight title; New Port Richey, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DREW McINTYRE & STU SANDERS
(May 7, 2008; from Eric Perez & Eddie Colon; New Port Richey, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: RODERICK STRONG
(February 16, 2008; from Erick Stevens; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JASON BLADE & KENNY KING
(November 9, 2007; from Jay & Mark Briscoe; Crystal River, FL)

FULL IMPACT PRO FLORIDA HERITAGE CHAMPION: SAL RINAURO
(November 9, 2007; from Erick Stevens; Crystal River, FL)

IWA MID-SOUTH HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: CHUCK TAYLOR
(MAY 3, 2008; defeated Claudio Castagnoli in a tournament final; Joliet, IL)

IWF HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEVIN KNIGHT
(May 8, 2008; from Travis Blake; West Paterson, NJ)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEIJI MUTO
(April 27, 2008; from Shinsuke Nakamura; Osaka, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: TOGI MAKABE & TORU YANO
(February 17, 2008; from Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko; Tokyo, Japan)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: WATARU INOUE
(December 8, 2007; from Ryusuke Taguchi; Osaka, Japan)

OVW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: NICK DINSMORE
(February 20, 2008; from Jay Bradley; Louisville, KY)

OVW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RAMÓN & RAÚL
(February 27, 2008; from Paul Birchall & Stu Sanders; Louisville, KY)

OVW TV CHAMPION: TOMMY McNALER
(April 16, 2008; from Joey Matthews; Louisville, KY)

OVW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: SERENA
(May 23, 2008; from Josie; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: HUMAN TORNADO
(February 24, 2008; defeated Karl Anderson and Roderick Strong in three-way tournament final; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RODERICK STRONG & JACK EVANS
(May 18, 2008; from Kevin Steen & El Generico; Burbank, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(March 2, 2008; from Mitsuharu Misawa; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: YOSHINOBU KANEMARU
(October 27, 2007; from Mushiking Terry; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: AKITOSHI SAITIO & BISON SMITH
(May 23; from Naomichi Marafuji & Takeshi Sugiura; Tokyo, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: NIGEL McGUINNESS
(October 6, 2007; from Takeshi Morishima; Edison, NJ)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: VACANT
(May 10, 2008; last titleholders Jay and Mark Briscoe ordered to vacate title after Mark suffered an ankle injury)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: MSCHIF
(April 26, 2008; from Sara Del Rey; Berwyn, IL)

TNA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: AWESOME KONG
(January 7, 2008; from Gail Kim; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: SAMOA JOE
(April 13, 2008; from Kurt Angle; Lowell, MA)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: HOMICIDE & HERNANDEZ
(MAY 11, 2008; defeated Team 3D in final round of "Deuces Wild" tag team tournament, Orlando, FL)

TNA X CHAMPION: PETEY WILLIAMS
(April 15, 2008; from Jay Lethal; Orlando, FL)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: CHRIS JERICHO
(March 10, 2008; from Jeff Hardy; Milwaukee, WI)

WWE RAW WORLD CHAMPION: TRIPLE-H
(April 27, 2008; from Randy Orton in a "Fatal Four-Way" match that also included John Cena and John Bradshaw Layfield; Baltimore, MD)

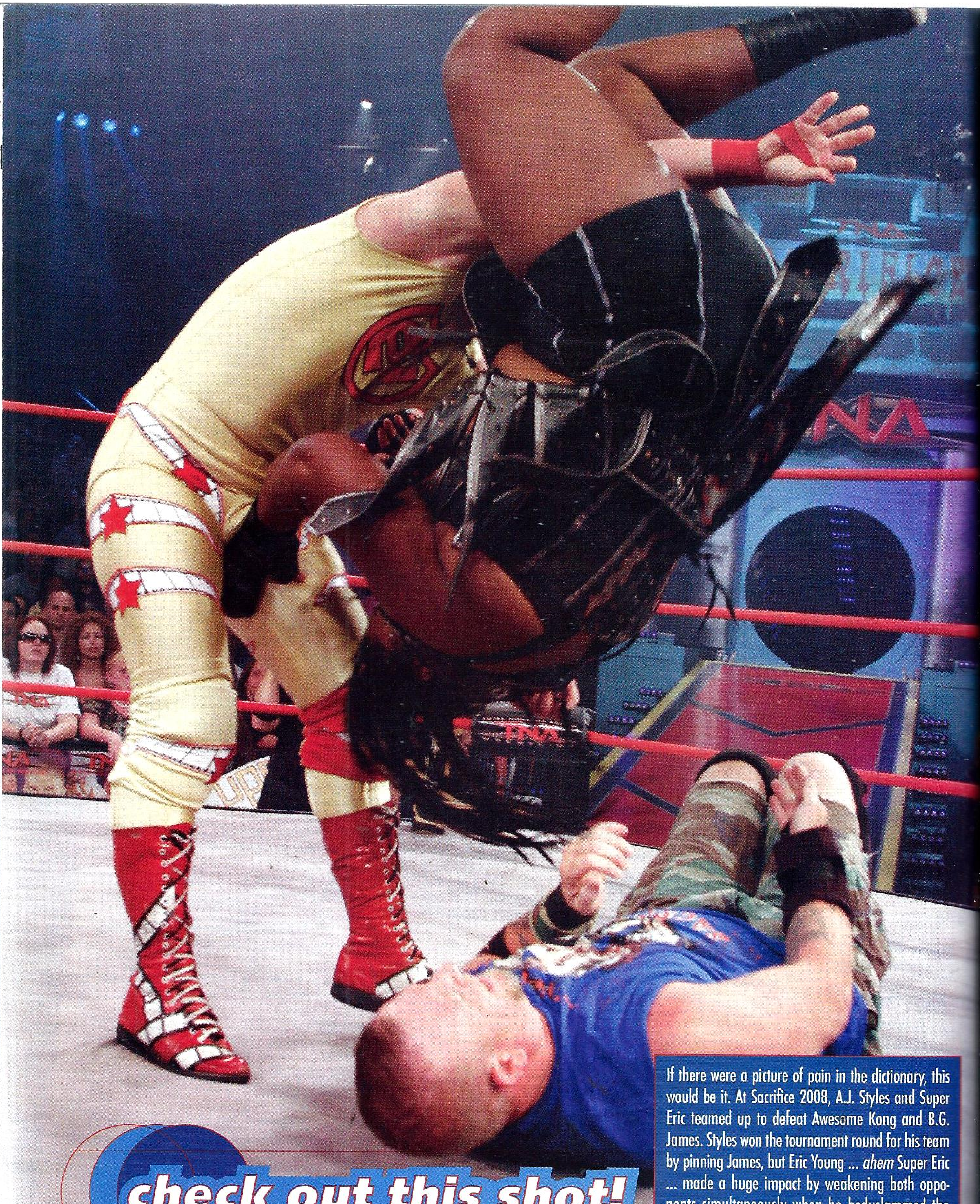
WWE RAW WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: HARDCORE HOLLY & CODY RHODES
(December 10, 2007; from Lance Cade & Trevor Murdoch; Bridgeport, CT)

WWE SMACKDOWN WORLD CHAMPION: VACANT
(April 29, 2008; General Manager Vickie Guerrero stripped Undertaker of the title claiming his gogoplata finisher was too dangerous to other Smackdown wrestlers; Atlantic City, NJ)

WWE SMACKDOWN WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JOHN MORRISON & THE MIZ
(November 13, 2007; from Matt Hardy & Montel Vontavious Porter; Wichita, KS)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: MATT HARDY
(April 27, 2008; from Montel Vontavious Porter; Baltimore, MD)

WWE WOMEN'S CHAMPION: MICKIE JAMES
(April 14, 2008; from Beth Phoenix; London, England)



check out this shot!

If there were a picture of pain in the dictionary, this would be it. At Sacrifice 2008, A.J. Styles and Super Eric teamed up to defeat Awesome Kong and B.G. James. Styles won the tournament round for his team by pinning James, but Eric Young ... *ahem* Super Eric ... made a huge impact by weakening both opponents simultaneously when he bodyslammed the 210-pound Kong on top of James.

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling